

THE JAMES BOYS WEEKLY.

Containing Stories of Adventure.

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NEW YORK, AUGUST 22, 1902.

Price 5 Cents.

THE JAMES BOYS' FIGHT TO A FINISH;

OR,

CARL GREENE'S CAMPAIGN OF BULLETS.

BY D. W. STEVENS.



As the boats shot into midair the occupants looked down and saw a sheet of foam—a caldron of white where the falling water was madly churned at the foot of the fall. Then down, down fell the boats. The bandits held their breath.

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CHAPTER I.

BANDITS PLOT FOR GOLD.

In one of the large towns of Missouri there was at the time of which we write a building used as a storage warehouse. It had come into existence in an unusual way. The town had been visited by a severe fire, and numerous edifices had been destroyed. Among them were two or three stores, the contents of which had been saved by hard labor.

When the fire had been controlled there was need of a place to house the goods. A large structure was devoted to the purpose, and filled with the articles named.

As so much of value was included, this building had been made a sort of fort. Great pains had been taken to barricade and strengthen it, for the times were unsettled and lawless in a measure, and when all was done it was believed to be burglar proof.

A few rods from the storehouse was an ordinary house. In this house, on a certain evening, three men were seated in conversation.

"Well," remarked one of the trio, "we may safely expect to see the end of our job to-night."

"So it looks, Jesse," replied a second man.

"Then for the goods of the storehouse."

"Unless we are interrupted."

"There is no sign of suspicion yet?"

"No."

"It would be hard luck if the things should prove less valuable than we anticipate."

"I think our information is authentic. If so we may expect silks, laces, jewels, silverware and the like—no mean haul, even for us!"

"Ha, ha! Wouldn't these people get into a fever if they knew the meek and quiet men who lately hired this house were none other than the dreaded James Boys?"

"Not to mention Cole Younger."

"And those at work on our tunnel."

"Oh, as to that, all the boys but us three came in the night time, and they have not been seen."

"They will be known by their works."

"True, Frank."

Another man entered the room.

"What progress, Jim Cummins?" was asked of him.

"Good, Jesse! We must be near the end of the tunnel."

"Brave! Then the hated bandits will soon be busy."

"Our horses are not yet here."

"They are due this evening, Cole."

"Let them come and we will get the silks and satins in short order!"

The men who indulged in this conversation seemed to be very well satisfied with themselves and their plans, but if the villagers had been able to overhear them, the satisfaction would not have been mutual.

Names had been mentioned which would have ominous meaning.

It was at the time when Jesse James, his brother Frank, together with Cole Younger, Jim Cummins and the rest of the wild band rode roughshod over Missouri. More, the four persons in the room were those whose names have just been given.

The bandits had heard of the extemporaneous warehouse and its valuable goods, and, ever on the alert to make a seizure which would profit them in a pecuniary sense, they had planned to make the break. They had hired the house where they now were, and from there they had been digging a tunnel to the cellar of the storehouse.

All had been done quietly and skillfully, and the townspeople rested in supreme ignorance of the fact that Jesse James and his wild band were in the heart of the town.

Panic would have followed if they could have known the truth, for the boldest of men paid due respect to the valor of the bandits.

The four leaders remained in conversation for half an hour, and

then Jesse rose and went below. The cellar of the house was filled with piles of earth which had been taken from the tunnel, and was a weird-looking place, but he was used to that. He passed on and entered the tunnel itself.

It was a narrow passage which led toward the storehouse, affording just room enough for the diggers to labor.

The leader was greeted with a shout.

"Just in time, Jesse!"

"What now, Jack Keene?"

"We have perforated the wall."

"Ha, is that so?"

"Look for yourself."

"I see the breach; is the other cellar really beyond?"

"So it seems."

"Enlarge the aperture so we can crawl through."

Jack Keene and Ed McMillan, who were using the spades, renewed their efforts with zeal, and the small opening grew larger.

The scene was impressive and grim. Jesse stood watching their efforts, as did most of the other bandits, though Hobbs Kerry and Bill Chadwell were kept busy carrying back the earth removed by those in front. Determined-looking fellows were these Missouri bandits, and, when their present work was considered, they became more than ever striking of look in the wild cellar and the flickering light of the lanterns.

A few minutes passed, and then Jack Keene threw down his spade.

"I can go through there!" he exclaimed.

"Softly!" cautioned Jesse. "There is one chance in a hundred that there may be somebody inside. We will soon learn. Stay here, all but Jack. He and I will make a preliminary survey of the ground."

"We take lanterns, don't we, Jesse?" asked Jack.

"You may take one."

"And you?"

"I'll be at your side with a revolver ready for use."

"Come on!"

Jack crept through the aperture, and the bandit king soon stood beside him. They paused and gazed around.

"Only a common cellar," remarked Jack.

"So much the better."

"Yes, they would not put their treasures down here."

"All seems clear above."

"Oh! it is next to certain there is no watchman. But say, Jesse, this looks uncanny here. Just like a place for ghosts."

"We can match any ghosts that may show up. I reckon the way is all clear. Still, we will be duly careful and not let any person of the flesh get the bulge on us if such a man is here."

"Why do you speak of that? We have all along been told that no watchman was set."

"I suppose we are the only men who never lie," grimly answered Jesse. "Of course I do not expect to see anybody here, but we may well be cautious. Now for the upper regions."

They ascended the stairs. Much to their satisfaction the door there proved to be unlocked, and they reached the ground floor. A critical glance showed that the windows were so well barricaded that they need not fear the light being seen from the street.

"All appears well," added Jesse.

"Boxes and barrels are numerous," replied Jack.

"Yes."

"Let us dive in and see what is there."

Click, click!

It was a sound at one side—a sound which might have passed unnoticed by a novice, but these men recognized a familiarity in it.

As one man they wheeled.

Close to them stood a third person, and the light of their own lantern glimmered on the polished barrel of a revolver held in his hand.

"You will not get any stuff," he deliberately declared.

"Eh!" cried Jesse James.

"You are robbers!" added the unknown.

"Well, who in thunder are you?"

"I demand your surrender."

"See here. Who are you, anyhow?"

"I am watchman here."

"But I thought there was no watchman?"

"That was a little trick of the citizens."

"Oh! it was, eh?"

Jesse and Jack stood and stared at the man with the revolver. A quick survey of the large room had failed to show any other person, and their brief anxiety had died away. One man could do no great harm, and they began to enjoy the situation. They regarded him as a fool to try and worry them.

"So you really want us to surrender?" added Jesse.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"You are burglars."

"So we are. What of it?"

Following his last words, the bandit king abruptly added:

"This will bring them!"

He whistled in a peculiar way, and the watchman showed nervousness for the first time. He clutched his revolver the tighter.

"What does that mean?" he asked.

"Look and see!"

The other bandits had been listening, and at the sound of the whistle they moved with such celerity that before the watchman had been allowed time to study the situation they came pouring up the stairs.

He gazed with distended eyes.

"If you want to do any arresting," pursued Jesse, coolly, "here we are. Will you take us?"

The watchman breathed quickly. He was excited, but there was not a cowardly fiber in his being. He saw he had struck more than he could manage according to the original programme, but the combativeness in his nature came to the front.

"I will die in defence of my trust!" he cried.

Abruptly he turned the revolver upon Jesse.

Bang!

A bullet cut a hole in the bandit's coat, and Jesse knew it had touched the skin as well.

"Seize him!" cried the leader.

Bang! bang!

Oll Sheppard reached the watchman and was knocked down for his agility; he fell on the lantern, plunging the room into darkness as the glass went to pieces.

Bang!

The last shot was fired in the dark, but there was a yell from one of the bandits.

"I'm a dead man!" he exclaimed.

Jesse was enraged at what he regarded as the slowness of his men, and he leaped madly forward to get at the watchman; he encountered a man and grappled with him.

"Death to you!" he hissed.

"You shall die first!" was the defiant retort.

Back and forth they struggled, each trying to get the advantage, but without success for a time. Then Jesse succeeded in throwing his opponent, and he promptly sat upon his body. His first thought was to use a knife on him immediately, but he thought better of it.

"I've got him!" suddenly cried a voice near at hand.

"Here is the watchman."

It was another voice at still another point, and Jesse grew dazed. What meant all this?

"Get a light!" he cried, anxiously.

Fortunately for all, perhaps, this order was obeyed sooner than was to be expected. Frank James came hurrying up from below with a lantern, and clearly alarmed over the situation.

"What does all this mean?" he demanded.

He held the lantern well up, and as the light fell on the scene a most novel sight was revealed. Three different men were on the floor, held down by other men. One of the prostrate persons was the watchman, while the others were bandits, and Jesse James felt decidedly sheepish when he saw that his own prisoner was none other than Wood Hite of his band. In the darkness men had grappled with each other blindly, and the warmest fights had been between friends.

As the truth dawned upon all there was a general laugh.

"Well, this is a comedy of errors!" declared Jack Keene.

Jesse was not in a mood to laugh. He leaped to his feet and drew a revolver.

"I have a mind to kill you!" he snapped, his gaze on the watchman. "A bullet will do you good——"

"Stop!" interrupted Frank. "No more of shooting. What has been done already may be the ruin of us. Put up your pistol!"

"But this knave has played the dickens with us——"

"And now you want to complete the ruin, eh? Fool! put up your revolver, I say!"

Sullenly Jesse slipped the weapon back into place.

"This has been a stupid piece of work!" he growled.

"Never mind," answered Jack Keene. "If the alarm has not gone out no damage is done, and we have the watchman secure."

"Tie the fellow up!" ordered Jesse, sharply. "Put ropes enough on him so he can't get away if he has the strength of a Samson. We will not have any more difficulty from him."

The watchman was duly bound. It was found that none of the bandits had been seriously injured in the fight, and when their few wounds had been seen to, all became more cheerful.

"Go for the stuff here," directed the leader. "See just what we have, and what can be got away with. Then if the boys show up with the horses, we will get out of this town before day dawns."

Search was made in all the boxes. As they had expected, there was, as a rule, nothing of value to them, but enough silks were found for their purpose, as well as a quantity of jewelry.

The things they intended to take off with them were duly made up in packages, and then they were ready for action.

"Will it not be best to send out a scout, to see if the horses have arrived?" asked Frank James.

"We have men out to see to that," reminded Jesse.

"Yes, but they do not come."

"That indicates no news."

"I don't like to sit down here in idleness."

"It will do no harm to look into it. Jack Keene, do you go out and see if anything can be learned."

Jack had taken two steps toward the door when a head appeared by the cellar stairs.

"Clell Miller!" cried Frank.

"He brings news."

Clell hastened forward. It needed but one glance to show that he brought tidings he deemed important, and he was not long in making himself heard.

"Boys," he exclaimed, "the dickens is to pay!"

"Something gone wrong with the horses?" asked Cole Younger.

"I haven't heard a word about the horses, but there is something right in this town which discounts all else."

"What?"

"Carl Greene, the detective!"

"Thunder!"

"He is here."

"Where?"

"Gone to call on Emmons, the town magnate."

"Does he know we are here?"

"Draw your own conclusions."

"How do you know he is here?" demanded Jesse.

"I saw him."

"When?"

"A few minutes ago. As I watched for the horses to come I noticed five or six men enter the town. They seemed to be strangers and seeking for something. They stopped at the hotel, but were there only a few minutes. The landlord came out with them and directed them to a given point. I had grown suspicious so I got as near them as possible. Boys, it is Carl Greene sure, and the fact that they have called on the leading man of the town tells its own story."

"By thunder!" cried Jesse. "We are in for another fight with that accursed detective!"

CHAPTER II.

HOT WORK FOR THE ROBBERS.

The bandits stood in silence looking at each other in a species of stupor. They were accustomed to encounter Carl Greene at unfortunate times, but in this case, if their fears were realized, they bade fair to lose their plunder, if not their lives.

The light of the lanterns revealed a striking group.

The muscular, roughly-dressed, strong-faced company were always impressive, but now each face bore a scowl and look of hatred for Carl Greene, and they would have delighted an artist as models.

"Well," finally spoke Frank James, "if we have got to fight Carl Greene I reckon we know how to do it."

"But the things we have made up to carry off?" added Jim Cummins.

"Will have to be given up."

"I am not sure of that!" cried Jesse.

"How can we get away with them?"

"Let time answer that."

"Remember," put in Cole Younger, "that we have no proof as yet that Carl Greene is after us, or that he is aware of our presence here."

"Did you ever know Carl to be around unless he was after us?" retorted Jesse.

"He is a bloodhound," admitted Frank. "The sharpest detective in Missouri, he seems to live only to hunt the James Boys. Relentless Nemesis, will he never let up on us?"

"Yes, when we are dead."

"He shall die first!"

"This is idle talk," interrupted Jesse. "What we want now is to be practical. Clell Miller, are you sure that one of the men you saw was Carl Greene?"

"Yes."

"That settles it. We know our way of action now. Clell, do you return to your post of duty and still watch for the coming of our comrades with the horses. Cole Younger, come with me and we will spy on the men who interview Mr. Magnate Emmons. Frank, remain in charge here and have all prepared for quick departure if it comes to that."

No time was lost in carrying out this programme.

Jesse, Cole and Clell left the storehouse, and then passed from the private house to the street.

"All is quiet," remarked Cole.

"Still waters run deep. Carl is not the man to go around shouting his plans until he is ready to do serious work."

"True."

"Clell, go to your post, and if the horses show us, lose no time in acting. Follow me, Cole."

The trio separated, and Jesse and Cole went toward Emmons' house.

"A light is burning," said Cole.

"Yes: the conference is on."

"Can't we get a look inside?"

"Just what I wish to do. If Carl is there I want a sight of him."

"Try the window."

They crept to the point mentioned and found there was sufficient space by the curtain to obtain the desired view. Cautiously Jesse put up his head until he could see inside. Then his head sunk down.

"Well?" questioned Cole.

"It is Carl Greene!" hissed the bandit king.

"Oho!"

"He is in conference with Emmons."

"Give me a look."

Cole satisfied himself and then lowered his head.

"They talk earnestly about something."

"About us, doubtless."

"Can't we raise the window a bit and get a knowledge of their remarks?"

"I will try it."

The plan was tried, but the sash proved to be fastened down and the effort went for nothing.

"We can't overhear them without going in by the door," added Cole.

"Do you suggest that?"

"No; it would be almost certain discovery, and what good would it do us? Our best way is to go soft and light. Carl is here, and we know that we do not want to be here any longer than is positively necessary. Would that the horses would come; we want to flee from Carl."

Jesse drew a revolver and pointed it toward the window.

Cole seized his leader's arm.

"Stop—stop!" he breathed. "You are mad, Jesse."

The bandit king lowered his revolver.

"I suppose you are right; I must think of the band, not of revenge. For the sake of a little start on this special occasion, I must allow this detective to keep his life. Well, if it is to be so, we need not delay here. Let us go to Clell and learn if there is news of the horses."

They went, but it was the same old story.

Their missing comrades had not put in an appearance with the horses, and they were as far from a solution of the problem of how to escape as ever. Jesse meditated, and then directed:

"Follow us, Clell."

"Who is to stay here?" inquired Cole.

"Nobody."

"Then who will receive the horses?"

"It looks very much as if nobody would, for the good reason that the horses do not seem likely to put in an appearance. The idea chiefly in my mind is that an immediate consultation is in order, and I want all present and prepared for action."

"You may be right."

"Unless we get away soon there will be bloody times here before many hours."

"I fear so."

No more was said until they were in the house where all their

plotting had been done. There Jesse collected the band and laid the situation clearly before them. They were made to see that Carl Greene was surely on the ground. There was nothing to tell why he was there, but to the men who had been so long and persistently hunted by him all things went to prove that they were again the objects of his action.

"What is to be done?" was Jesse's conclusion.

"Dare we wait for the horses?" asked Jim Cummins.

"It may be death to us," replied Jesse.

"But are we going to desert all the plunder we have worked so hard for?" remonstrated Bill Chadwell.

"Take it away," suggested Hobbs Kerry.

"How can we?"

"Secure horses here from the citizens."

"Carl would drop on that game quickly."

"Then what are we to do?"

"Tell us, Jesse!"

The bandit king had been waiting for this moment. He had sprung the revelation, and nobody had suggested a way out of the difficulty. Now he was ready to talk.

"Boys," he replied, "you know there is a river back of this town."

"Yes."

"There are boats on the river."

"Yes."

"Suppose we secure a couple of large ones, load the goods on them, and pull off down the stream?"

There was a moment of silence, and then Jim Cummins exclaimed:

"You have hit the only way, Jesse. The plan can't be considered what we would like, but it seems to be the one hope."

A little later they began to go out of the rear door with their burdens—a sight which would have caused wonder if the citizens had been witnesses of the affair.

The river was not far off, and it was soon reached. Two boats had been prepared, and the goods were quickly put on board.

"All ready?" Jesse then inquired.

"Yes."

"Enter!"

It was done: they took up the oars, and the boats moved off together. Thus far there had been no sign of trouble, but the leader looked back with a serious expression.

"Hallo-o-o!"

It was a prolonged shout from the shore; it gave the bandits a shock, and they looked to see the cause with more than one nervous shock.

"Thunder!" cried Cole, "there is a man on the bank!"

"Two of them—yes, three, four!"

"Jupiter, they are after us!" exclaimed Jesse.

"Hallo!"

Again came the shout, and when it was unheeded, another cry was added peremptorily.

"Stop that boat!"

"Do the fools think we will do it?" muttered Jesse.

"Stop, or we fire!"

"They will keep their word!" exclaimed Frank.

"No doubt."

"At such short distance and with so good light, they ought to hit the target every time."

"We have gone through bullets before."

Crack!

A rifle sounded, and a bullet struck the stream so close to the bandits that those in Jesse's boat were splashed with the water.

"They mean business."

"Are you going to pull up?" demanded the man on shore. "We can pick you all off, if we try to, and I tell you it will be done if you are stubborn. Pull this way."

"Bend your backs!" urged the bandit king, "and get all the speed out of her you can. They have to follow, and that will interfere with their target practice somewhat—"

Crack!

Crack!

Crack!

Shots began to come more thickly and accurately, for they touched the clothing of the bandits in more than one place. Evidently the firing had acted as a call, too, for more men appeared on the bank until it had a goodly line.

"We shall have to cross, shall we not?" asked Frank.

"If we do, good-by to the plunder."

"If we do not, it may be good-by to our lives."

"Boat, ahoy!"

It was a new, more commanding voice on shore, and Jesse quickly exclaimed.

"Carl Greene!"

It was he, sure!

"Pull this way," added the detective, "or you will all fall before

our rifles. You can plainly see that we have you in our power. Your lives are at our mercy; you surely will not be so blind as to fail to see this."

"I think we had better cross to the other bank," declared one of the bandits, nervously.

"And give up all we have here?"

"And be chased on foot?"

"We should be worse off than now."

These remarks were quickly leveled at the man who had counseled crossing, and he subsided, thoroughly squelched. Come what might, the robbers were committed to the plan of holding to the river.

Carl Greene had waited for an answer, but, as none came, he raised his voice once more.

"For the last time, surrender! If you refuse, we open fire."

"Fire, and be hanged to you!" retorted Jesse.

"Fool! have your own way!"

With this cry Carl turned toward his own men and the object was soon seen. The shooting began anew.

Crack!

Crack! crack!

Crack. crack. crack!

Spitefully the bullets whizzed around the ears of the fugitives, and Jesse's eyes glittered with anger. Several of his party were not included among those who pulled the oars, and he determined that they would not remain idle and be picked off like turkeys.

"Men!" he exclaimed, "give them a taste of our quality. Up with your rifles! Each man for himself, and try to make your shots reach the targets. Now—fire!"

The bandits were eager to obey, and they lost no time. Shot answered shot, and the air was vocal with the sharp reports. There were old scores to wipe out, and they did their best to cancel the debt.

Crack!

Crack!

Crack!

"This grows hot!" muttered Frank James, as his hat was perforated by a bullet.

"One of those shots will wing us," added Cole Younger.

"It is only luck that we have so long escaped death," coincided another bandit.

"If there is a coward here," cried Jesse, "let him leap out of the boat and give himself up. Who goes?"

"Not I!"

"Nor I!"

All joined in the cry, and nobody more firmly than the men who had expressed doubts as to the situation. Jesse's eyes had kindled anew—there was no weakening of the band that had followed him on many a wild raid. Come what might, they were prepared to fight to the end.

The bandit king was not sure that it would do to keep in the boat and be shot at so persistently, and he was considering the chances open to them if all leaped overboard and tried their luck in the water, when Frank suddenly held his head higher.

"What is that peculiar sound?" he asked.

"I hear nothing," answered Jesse.

"It is a kind of roaring, like that of a tornado."

"I notice it now, but I can't see that we need to care. Let it come if it will."

Crack, crack, crack!

There were other sounds to attract attention, but even in the midst of them Frank kept his ears open for the noise which had impressed him before.

"By thunder!" he exclaimed, "I think I have solved it."

"What?"

"Listen carefully! If that is not the roaring of a fall I am dull of comprehension."

"A fall?"

"Yes. I believe we are approaching one. We may be dashed to pieces!"

CHAPTER III.

THE JAMES BOYS IN A TRAP.

The bandits became alert. They did not know the river, and had no means of knowing what to expect, but the nature of the country made it possible that if a fall of any sort was reached it might be one of such size that the boat could not live through it, and this fear was given additional force by the fact that the sound was so deep.

Frank looked toward the shore.

"Possibly we might land and fight our way through the force of the south side," he suggested.

"No," replied Jim Cummins. "The water runs so swift here that we could not take a diagonal course."

"That is true," decided Jesse. "We must keep on."

One of the pursuers raised his voice in a shout. Pointing down the stream, he cried:

"Don't go further. Death awaits you there."

"Kind of him!" muttered Frank, sarcastically.

"There is a waterfall below," added the man, "and it is sure destruction to go over it."

"Our suspicion was correct."

"Pull this way, or you are dead men!"

This additional advice was greeted with a jeer by the fearless bandits. They knew how disinterested the advice was, and they had no notion of accepting it. Come what might, they were not going to throw themselves on the doubtful mercy of their foes.

"The boats whirl about badly," said Cole Younger.

"We are perfectly helpless," Jesse agreed. "The water runs like a race-horse. Men, up with your oars and let the crafts go alone."

It was done, and the boats shot ahead like arrows.

Deeper sounded the roar of the fall, and they knew they were near the crisis.

"It is a thunder-like noise," spoke Jim Cummins, raising his voice to a shout to make himself heard. "It must be a lofty precipice we are to go over."

No one answered. The enemy simply followed along the shore and looked on. They were waiting to see the fugitives go to destruction.

On, on!

"Look!"

The cry was from Jack Keene, but his voice was drowned by the roaring of the fall. He pointed. Even this he did not need to do. All saw before them a line of foam, and they knew the fall was there.

A few rods more and they were on the brink. The bandits held fast to the crafts. The leap was at hand.

Into the cloud of foam went the boats.

They reached the crest.

Before them they saw the river, but it was far below. The stoutest-hearted of all shivered at thought of such a leap. Death—death! Could they hope for more?

The boats shot out into space.

The moment which followed was one of the most thrilling in the lives of the bandits. Scarcely noticed by them, the light of day had been creeping over the earth, and at that time there was enough of the glimmer of dawn to make their view clear. And what a view they had!

As the boats shot into midair the occupants looked down and saw a sheet of foam—a caldron of white where the falling water was madly churned at the foot of the fall.

Then down, down fell the boats.

The bandits held their breath; they seemed to be going to sure destruction.

Not until the descent was almost over did the crafts lose their balance, but they turned slightly at last, and plunged end first into the whirlpool of foam.

Jesse James found himself submerged with a violent shock, but the habit of years of peril led him to gather his energies and seek to swim to safety.

For a moment it appeared he would be successful, and though all was obscure to his vision he battled zealously, but suddenly the situation changed. He seemed to be seized by gigantic arms and drawn backward.

"An undertow!" he thought.

He was right; he was being forced toward the rocks, and there was no mistaking the motive power.

In vain he struggled; he was perfectly helpless.

To breathe was impossible, and the pressure on his lungs grew most painful. With the grasp of the undertow on his person and the thunder of the fall in his ears, he was buffeted back.

"This is death!" he thought.

Suddenly a host of scorpions seemed to seize upon him, and the pain was intense, but it was soon over. A jar, and he found himself free from all his torment. He breathed again—life sprung anew through his veins.

He felt damp sand under him and he made an effort to rise. Just then some heavy object beat him down, and he found a human being lying on him. The person stirred vigorously.

Jesse thought he heard words pass the lips of the unknown, but the thunder of the fall drowned their import.

Squirming from under this man the bandit king rose to his feet. At first he tottered, but he soon grew stronger of limb and body.

He knew he had been thrown back of the fall, but all was darkness, and further than that he could tell nothing.

Somebody ran into him forcibly, and then strong arms were

wound around him. It did not seem to be a friendly clasp, but Jesse had begun to arrive at a conclusion, and he had no thought of fighting the man.

He had been cast under the fall by the undertow. Was it not likely that some of his own men had been served in the same way?

Remembering that he had a quantity of matches in a box so near waterproof that the brief immersion ought not to have spoiled them, he writhed away from his neighbor and then produced the matches.

He struck one.

It flamed up sullenly, as it were, and by its brief light he saw Jim Cummins, Clell Miller and Ed McMillan.

He saw their faces light up and their lips move, as if in a shout of pleasure, but the match died out.

Seeking Clell's side, the leader tried to shout to him, but the roar of the water prevented a word from being heard. Seeing he must proceed slowly, Jesse set out to learn how many men he had with him. They appeared to catch his idea, and he ranged them side by side and counted the entire number.

Greatly to his surprise, he found all present.

Just as he had been cast back so had all the bandits been served, and not a life had been lost by the adventure.

But what was the present situation?

They were under the fall, and it needed but one moment of attention to the massive sheet to tell that they could not get out the way they had come in.

Was there a place of exit by the sides of the fall?

Catching Jesse's idea, all sought for the desired avenue, but the result brought only disappointment. The sheet of water reached from side to side, and they were hopelessly hemmed in.

Consultation was necessary, and the leader drew them back still further under the fall. It might be a vitally important question to know how far the cave-like recess extended.

Back they went, and still the solid rock they dreaded did not oppose their advance.

The roar of the fall grew dulter, and Jesse finally halted. Raising his voice, he called to the man nearest him:

"What have we struck now?"

"The bowels of the earth, I should say."

"We are prisoners here, it seems."

"Anyhow, Carl Greene can't get at us."

"That's a fact."

"Is there no way to make a light?"

"What have we to light?"

"There may be wood under here."

"How could it get here?"

"Drift in as we did."

"There is something in that."

"It might be too wet to burn now."

"Make the try. Scatter, men, and see if a piece of board, or anything of that sort is to be had."

This order was heard by several of the band, and they moved accordingly, feeling their way through the darkness. Jesse found nothing, and it was a great surprise to him when the place suddenly became illuminated. He gazed in wonder and saw Cole Younger holding a lantern above his head.

The bandits gathered around the lieutenant.

"Where in thunder did you get that?" demanded Jim Cummins.

"Look around you!"

All obeyed, and they were surprised to see what was like a rude room. It was only a recess under the rocks, but two old chairs, a table, several blankets and other things met their view.

Amazement was expressed on every face.

"Why, we have struck a human resort!" cried Frank James.

"Where is the owner?"

"Look for him!" directed Jesse.

They followed Cole as he walked on with the lantern, and were still moving under the rocks when Cole abruptly stopped.

"See!" he exclaimed, pointing with his free hand.

All obeyed, and there was no need to ask what he meant; in front of them lay a human skeleton.

They were awed for a moment, but they were not men to long be influenced by even death.

"Well, I reckon he will not dispute our right to stay here," said Jim Cummins.

"I would rather he would dispute it than lie here as a reminder of what we may come to."

"Bah, Hobbs Kerry, don't get down-hearted."

"He died here—why may not we do the same?"

"Because we won't!" declared Jesse. "Now don't let your courage fail, for we are all right; this fellow was some old hermit, who died as he preferred to live. What of it? We don't take to such things, and you will see that we will get out safely."

"Jesse," said Frank, "how did this old fellow get in and out?"

"I don't know."

"Not by the fall."

"Possibly he found a way there."

"If so we can."

"Things may have changed since his day."

"I don't believe he has been dead long."

"His bones are wholly bare."

"There must be things in this den that would devour a dead man as soon as the chance was vouchsafed them."

"Very likely you are right."

"Let a strict search be made for a place of exit. Go to the fall first and let us be sure that Carl Greene and his men can't come in."

This plan was carried out. By the light of the lantern they had a good look at the mouth of their singular quarters. They found that the descending sheet of water reached from bank to bank of the river, and came down in such volume that they could not possibly pass out.

"We are in a trap," declared Cole Younger.

"For the time we are prisoners surely."

"Anyhow, Carl Greene can't get in."

"So it seems."

"Trapped, and where we may starve," added Cole, lugubriously. "Yet why despair? Luck may be with us."

"There is a way out!" exclaimed Jesse. "The man we call the hermit—and such he doubtless was—must have had a way of going forth to secure the necessities of life. Where he went out we can go, too."

"If we can find the place."

"Look for it."

"Yes, before Carl finds the way in."

They moved accordingly, but the result proved that they were not to have plain sailing. Even the lantern failed to reveal any exit to the outer world, and they sat down in a mood far from pleasant.

All they had stolen from the storehouse had been lost in the grasp of the flood, and they were total losers on the venture to which they had given so much time. More than that, they were prisoners in the cave, and the imprisonment must be endured without anything to eat. It was not strange that they were an angry and violent company as they kept the enforced inactivity of the cave.

During the forenoon all secured more or less sleep, and if they should succeed in getting out they would be prepared for work. Between naps, as it were, they made pilgrimages to the remote quarters of the cave to try and find an outlet, but they were not successful.

All this while the bones of the hermit had lain undisturbed. The bandits did not have enough fineness of feeling to give any reverence to the relic of mortality, nor were they afraid of it.

Finally, however, during the afternoon, Jesse chanced to pass near the skeleton. He held in his hand a stick picked up in the cave, and he stopped and began to move the bones carelessly.

As he did so, he saw the gleam of something, which had such an appearance that he bent and picked it up.

It was a sheet of once white but now soiled writing paper.

Thinking he saw written words on it, he carried it to the lantern.

Once there he found he was not in error, and he managed to decipher the following:

"TO THE WORLD—I am dying! Alone in this cave my life is going out. In health I have been content—ay, pleased to reside in solitude, but now the sight of a human face would be welcome. I weaken—but why dwell upon that? Let me die like a man.

"To whoever finds my remains, if they are ever found, let me say one thing. I am rich, and I make the finder my heir. My wealth should do some one good when I am gone. This has not always been my thought, but the approach of death changes my views.

"Let me do a little good, since I have never done any good in life.

"Before the late war broke out I deposited in bank a large sum of gold. I hired a division in the vault of the concern and there placed my money. I, alone, have a key to the niche in the vault where the gold is, and I know it has not been tampered with. It is there, and awaits a claimant.

"He who finds my bones is my heir. With this paper will be found a key which fits the niche in the vault, and also another paper which tells the name of the bank, etc.

"Take these things, go to the bank, get the gold, say nothing to any one, and then enjoy the gold. It amounts to two hundred thousand dollars in round numbers. You are my heir. Go for the legacy."

Here the writing ended, no signature or date being attached.

Quickly Jesse called his men and read the paper.

"Hurrah!" cried Jack Keene, "here is a fortune for us."

"Riches easily got."

"We shall swim in luxury once more."

"This will pay for all our troubles."

"But where is the gold?" asked Frank James, seriously. "We have no clue to the bank. Where is it?"

"Men!" exclaimed Jesse, "scatter and search for the second paper and the key. We must have them."

"The animals that devoured the miser may have eaten the paper," suggested Jim Cummins, soberly.

"We will not consider that possibility," declared Jesse. "Hunt as I have told you to do. Let no speck of dust go unseen, and we will find the paper and the key. We must!"

All the bandits were eager to search. Treasure-hunting was the ruling motive of their lives, and though this was out of the ordinary line, they did not take to it the less kindly. The hunt was begun with zeal and care.

Ed McMillan was lucky enough to find the key quickly, and one step was taken; but the most important thing was missing. Until they discovered the second paper they could not know in what bank the gold was deposited.

Long and minute was the search, and hours were consumed in it. At times they grew wholly discouraged, gave it up and sat down, wearied, but as they became rested they renewed the effort, and hunted over and over the ground perseveringly.

It was while they were thus engaged that Clell Miller, approaching the limit of the cave, chanced to see a speck of white sticking out of the bank of earth, something like two feet from the level. He lay hold of it.

It was paper.

He pulled at it. A mass of earth fell away, crumbling down upon his feet, while in his hand was a slip of paper.

Hastily he carried it to the light. Words were written on it, but they were so indistinct and earth-stained that he could not read them. Were they to be baffled after all?

The bandits gathered in a group while the leaders sought to decipher the contents of the paper.

"It is so badly soiled that we are beaten," finally decided Frank.

"Not yet!" stoutly replied Jesse.

"Can you read any part of it?"

"I hope to, yet!"

"Wash away the stains," suggested Wood Hite.

"And have the writing go, too? Not much?" declared Jesse.

"It is useless as it is."

"Give it to me!"

Impatiently the bandit king snatched away the document, and then he placed himself in the best light to get view of the dim writing. Anxiously his followers awaited the result.

Minutes passed, and then Jesse's face suddenly lighted up.

"I have it!" he exclaimed.

"Read!" directed Cole.

"I can make out but two words, but they are the all essential part of the concern—namely, the name of the bank. Look for yourself, Cole, and see what you make of it! Look there!"

Cole obeyed, and he was not long in uttering the name of a bank.

"That's it!" he added, positively.

"We know that bank."

"That we do!"

"Then we are on the track!"

"We have only to descend on the town, loot the bank and secure the gold. All will be easy if we can get out of here."

"And get into the bank."

"We know how to do that act."

Everybody desired a look at the paper, but when it had been passed around there was no opposition to the declaration that it had been read aright. Unless they had the wrong paper the secret was theirs.

"Yet, we are still in this cave," added Hobbs Kerry.

Jesse looked at his watch.

"If we are going out it is getting to be time to move," he said, "for night is already falling. Boys, can we pass this fall?"

"Impossible!"

"Then what are we to do?"

"Find the way the hermit used to go out."

"Haven't we tried that in vain?"

"Do you know," put in Jack Keene, "all the while we have been standing here I have felt a current of air. I had not noticed it before, but I do now."

"So do I," said Dick Little.

"There does seem to be something of the sort. Try to locate it."

They separated and moved away. Clell Miller chanced to take the course to where he had found the paper, and as he did so he observed the current of air more strongly than ever. He reached the very spot where the paper had been secured, and then, after a brief pause, his cry called his comrades.

"See here!"

"What?"

"I believe I have found the opening."

"But we looked there before."

"When I secured the paper a fragment of earth fell away with it; there is an opening beyond, and it is through that the air is coming."

"Thunder! you are right."

"The cavity leads us."

"Let me explore it!" eagerly requested Jack Keene.

He clawed at the opening for a moment, and then, as more earth fell away, squirmed into the gap. He disappeared from view entirely, and the rest of the band eagerly waited for the result.

Presently he returned.

"Boys, it is all right," he declared.

"How?"

"I have been to the surface, and you can all do the same. It is beyond question the old hermit's avenue of travel."

"Clear way for us all?"

"Yes."

"Any signs of Carl Greene and his men?"

"I saw none."

"There must be a careful search made. Jack, follow me and we will do a little scouting; remain here, all others, and we will return as soon as possible. Do not, under any condition, come out until you hear from us."

Jesse and Jack went away. Ten minutes passed and then they returned; their expressions were satisfied.

"Boys," said the leader, "we will soon be out of here. I reckon the detective and his men have given us up as sure victims of the brawling waterfall. Anyhow, we saw nothing of them, and the whole scene appears to be clear. We can now go out, and I reckon this sort of thing is over with. I am not sorry, for, though this cave proved a rock of refuge, I like the open world even better, with all its dangers."

"I am with you."

"And I" cried the bandits in chorus.

"What is the plan, Jesse?" asked Jim Cummins.

"To get away."

"But how?"

"Our horses may have come."

"If they have not, what then?"

"We will consult."

"We must get to the bank and secure the hermit's treasure as soon as possible."

"That we must!" echoed several of the party.

"I shall not delay for a moment, but, for now, let us think only of getting away. Are you all ready?"

"Yes."

"Come, then."

Jesse led the way out of the cave.

The night was not especially dark, and they had ample view when once on the surface of the earth. Peaceful was all around them, and the lights of the town were to be seen in the distance, glittering as if at peace with all the world.

CHAPTER IV.

THE RICHES OF THE BANK.

Three days later a party of over a dozen men were encamped in a grove near a town of considerable size. In this party we recognize several familiar faces, there being Frank James, Jim Cummins, Cole Younger and others. All had a listless air, but this disappeared as Jim suddenly cried:

"Here they come!"

Jesse James and Jack Keene appeared in the group.

"What luck?" demanded Frank, quickly.

"We can't complain," replied Jesse.

"Have you seen the bank?"

"Yes."

"How strong is it?"

"Very strong."

"Then why do you say you can't complain?"

"Because we have looked the place over and decided on a plan of action. We are going to tear the chimney down."

"Why will you joke on such a subject?"

"I am not joking," returned the bandit king. "Listen to me, all. We went to the town and found the bank a very secure structure, and both Jack and myself were impressed with the belief that it would be a tough job to break it open with anything less than powder."

"That is out of the question."

"Of course, for we have to work long and carefully to secure the hermit's hidden gold, even after the bank is open. So we looked for other means."

"Did you see the cashier?"

"We did, and found him such a keen-looking fellow that we decided we could not by any trick get him to open the bank at night."

"And then?"

"We saw the chimney. Briefly, the bank is of two divisions; an old and a modern part. Each has a chimney. That to the old part is so concealed from the view of any one who might be on the street that we saw we could labor there almost in safety. More, we saw that the chimney was not only low, but the bricks were loosened by time until, judging from looks, the mortar must be crumbling away greatly."

"Suppose you do take the chimney down?"

"We have only to go below the level of the room and entrance to the loft will be ours. Once inside, it will be easy to descend to the floor where the valuables are."

Silence greeted the proposition. The bandits had entered banks in almost all conceivable ways during their career, but to tear down a chimney as a means was new to all.

Nobody cared to put the seal of his approval on the scheme.

Jesse waited quietly, and when it was seen that he had no more to say the men began to debate the point.

There could be but one result, since all were eager to get inside and secure the hermit's gold, and it ended as Jesse had planned. Come what might, they decided on the scheme.

On the way back the scouts had noticed a shed-like structure belonging to a mason, and there they felt sure they could secure the tools needed to tear away the top of the chimney. Consequently the bandits settled down to enjoy the little time left them before the new and hazardous undertaking.

By a circuitous route they had approached their present location, and they were now ready to make the trial for the hermit's gold.

Night fell. It was not dark as they could wish, but they had to take it as it was. They waited until the lights of the town went out, and then left their refuge.

Two men were left in charge of the horses, while the rest followed Jesse to the street. As far as they could see it was deserted, and as they believed they had awakened no suspicion among the citizens, they were bold, though not rash.

The visit to the mason's was successful; they gained all the tools they wanted, including a ladder.

Next they went to the bank. Passing around to the rear they paused and looked at the older part of the building.

Little talk took place. The ladder was raised, and some of the band moved up to the roof. The first discoveries were in their favor. The mortar of the chimney was found to be crumbling, and the bricks were loosened without difficulty.

They began with zeal.

The level of the roof was reached; they continued, and at last a hole was made under the ridgepole.

It was enlarged, and then Jack went as the pioneer, aided by a lantern. He found solid floor below, and the men followed after.

"So far, good," commented Jesse. "The way to the next floor is clear. Come with me, and we will learn what we are to expect."

They soon stood upon the floor where the business of the bank was done, and sight of this place fired the blood of the robbers.

"Let us make sure of the regular funds first," urged Ed McMillan.

"It may be as well," agreed Jesse. "See what these fellows keep to do business on!"

The safe proved to be an ancient affair, and as the bandits were provided for such labor, and knew well how to open a safe, the interior was soon gained.

"Whew! what a pile of greenbacks!" cried Cole Younger.

"Pull them out!"

"Here is a fortune, all by itself!"

"Finish up the job," finally directed Jesse, briskly. "There is more for us to do."

"Where is the hermit's wealth?"

"In the vault of course."

"Where is the key?"

"I have that," replied Jesse. "Make less talk and follow me."

He led the way to the basement. The lantern shed a grewsome light on rough, damp and ghostly white walls, but they found what seemed to be the vault in the centre.

"Say, that looks strong," grumbled Dick Little.

"There is only an ordinary lock on the door."

"Bring the crowbar," directed Jesse. "We can wrench it off easier than to use any other means."

The implement was secured as soon as possible and eager hands grasped it. Getting a good hold they wrenched stoutly. The lock had been arranged to stay, but it resisted them only briefly. It fell away.

"Victory is ours!" exclaimed Cole Younger.

"Now for the rest!"

The bandits had grown excited. To plunder was an old story

with them, but this time they expected gold, and that was a very scarce thing at the day of which we write. Greenbacks were the standard article in money, and a change to the gold expected from the hermit was a novelty, indeed.

The vault door was flung open.

Jesse pressed forward, lantern in hand, to gain the interior. No thought of trouble or excitement was in the minds of the bandits, and it was a complete surprise when Jesse recoiled with a cry of terror.

Wide opened the eyes of all the band.

Before them stood a white-robed figure.

"A ghost!" was the cry.

"Providence save us!" cried Frank James.

The white object advanced toward the men, and this was enough to complete their dismay. All fled madly but Jesse, Frank and Cole Younger.

"A ghost—a ghost!" was the repeated cry.

Those who stood their ground were really little less demoralized than those who ran.

Strange, "creepy" feelings went all over Jesse James, and he fully expected to encounter an unearthly visitor.

"Are—are you dead?" gasped Cole, feebly.

"I never harmed you," she said. "Have pity on me, and do not condemn me to this awful fate."

She reached out her hands, clasped and white, and her voice was tremulous with emotion.

Jesse's blood began to flow naturally. It was almost past belief that a living person should emerge from the vault; yet his own eyes and ears told him it was so now. No ghost, this young woman, but one as much flesh and blood as himself.

As his superstitious fears faded his wonder increased.

"Miss," he managed to say, "what does this mean?"

"Have you come to kill me?" she answered.

"Of course not. Why should we?"

"Were you not sent by Adam Oggsmorn?"

The bandit king recognized the name of the bank cashier.

"Not much!" he exclaimed.

"Then why are you here?"

"Well, you see, we—that is, we—well, we were just looking around," he stammered.

"Where is Oggsmorn?"

"Abed and asleep, I reckon."

"Then he left me to die!"

"Why?"

"So I would not tell of his crimes."

"What crimes?"

"His robbery of the bank."

"Oh! did he do that?"

"Yes."

"Where do you come in?"

"I discovered his embezzlement, and he then decoyed me to the vault and shut me in."

"Ah! So he is a dishonest cashier? You found him out, and he then imprisoned you here?"

"Yes."

"Who are you?"

"Missouda Palmer, daughter of the president of the bank."

"I see."

Again she clasped her hands.

"Sirs, oh, sirs, will you not release me? I know you are honest men by your looks, and you surely will not see me suffer death in this horrible place? You do not know what I have suffered here. Oggsmorn simply decoyed me in and slammed the door on me. I have been left in total darkness, and with insufficient air to breathe, and all the while I have listened in terror for the next act in the drama. I did not know whether Oggsmorn would let me starve here or return and kill me, but I preferred the slow death. I had no hope of rescue, for nobody of my friends had cause to think I was here."

"How long have you been in here?" asked Jesse, curiously.

"I suppose it has been but three or four hours, though it seems a century. Did my father send you here?"

"Well, not exactly."

"Then how do you happen to be here?"

Jesse scratched his head doubtfully.

"We are bank examiners," put in Frank.

"Yes, yes, so we are," added Jesse, quickly. "That's it, bank examiners."

"And you will protect me from Oggsmorn?"

"We will."

"He is a dishonest man."

"He has stolen from the bank, has he?"

"Yes."

"Infamous!"

"It is indeed."

"Such dishonesty makes my blood boil," asserted Jesse. "We have no use for a thief, and least of all, for a thief who has taken money from this bank before we could get here."

The bandit king turned to Frank and gravely added:

"Col. Bramblebank, kindly take charge of this lady. Find a safe and comfortable place for her on the second floor, and we will join you as soon as we are done here."

Frank was almost overwhelmed by the new name bestowed upon him, but he recovered quickly enough to do his part. He took the girl to the street door, and then to the back office. Meanwhile Jesse gathered his men anew, and proceeded in the attempt to get the hermit's gold.

"Have you the key?" asked Jim Cummins.

"Yes. Now for the place which it will fit!"

Along the sides of the vault were several little doors, each with a keyhole, and Jesse began to try the key to them hurriedly. The sixth attempt resulted in the key sinking into the recess properly, and when he gave it a turn, the little door flew back.

A cavity with several parcels, paper bound, were exposed.

"Quick, Jesse!" cried Jack Keene, eagerly.

"See if the hermit has deceived us!"

"Keep cool!"

The bandit king was not so cool himself as he would have them think, and his hands shook a trifle as he unwrapped the first of the packages.

A cry arose from the bandits.

"Gold!" was the shout.

They were right. The package was full of coins, neatly packed in rolls, and the last doubt vanished.

The men surged forward; each seized a parcel, and all began the task of feasting their eyes on the yellow metal.

There was no disappointment. The gold was there, and so was the name and address of the now dead owner, which fixed the treasure as that of the hermit.

"A noble haul!" declared Jim Cummins.

"This discounts the greenbacks!"

"We are rich again!"

"We will have piles of fun with this golden gain."

In their eagerness all the men had crowded into the vault.

Now they were surprised by a sudden ejaculation.

"Perdition!"

The bandits wheeled abruptly.

They had a fresh cause for wonder and alarm—at the door of the vault stood a strange man.

"Destruction!" he added blankly.

"Nabbed!" exclaimed Jim Cummins.

"Police!" asserted Wood Hite, nervously.

Jesse recovered his composure and sprang forward.

Presenting a revolver to the head of the intruder he cried:

"Surrender, or die!"

"Surrender!" echoed the man, stupidly.

"Yes, or I will blow out your brains."

"Who are you?"

"The James Boys!"

The intruder was silent for a moment, and then he broke into an unmusical laugh.

"Good!" he declared. "I catch the idea, and I am with you. I am the cashier of this bank and I am something of a thief myself!"

"You, the cashier?"

"Yes."

"Oggsmorn?"

"Just so."

"Why are you here?"

The cashier looked around with sudden nervousness.

"Well, you see——"

He stopped short.

"Do you want the girl?" asked Jesse.

"That is just it."

"She is dead."

The cashier grew very white.

"What?" he gasped.

"We found her here, smothered to death."

"Ruin! Then I am a murderer!"

"You are."

"I will blow my brains out! No, I will flee! No, I will ask you to take me into your band. Accept me as one of you. Ha, ha! who should make a better outlaw than a disgraced cashier?"

Jesse stood and gazed at the dishonest cashier several moments in silence. Then he spoke quietly:

"How long have you been an officer of this bank, sir?"

"Five years!" replied Oggsmorn.

"How long have you been a thief?"

"Five years."

"How much have you got away with?"

"Possibly fifty thousand dollars."

"Now you want to join us?"

"Yes."

"You put the girl in here?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"She happened to discover my work as a thief."

"Did you intend to let her die here?"

"I had no plan at the start, but I finally decided to ask her to elope with me. That's why I am here now. I was going to steal all there was in the bank, and then take her and skip—if she would go."

"You are frank."

"I know with whom I am talking."

"By which you mean that you know we will be with you?"

"Yes."

"Mister Cashier, what you do not know would fill a big book. The James Boys get their living by means which some people would not approve of, but if you imagine any other thief can make terms with them in such an off-hand way, you are decidedly mistaken. Your offer of alliance is rejected; we will have nothing to do with you."

"Rejected?"

"Yes."

"Boys," added Jesse to his followers, "have you cleared out all the cash?"

"Yes."

"Lock this fellow into the vault."

"No, no!" cried the cashier.

"Hustle him in!"

Wildly the cashier protested, but he spoke in vain. He was pushed into the vault, and then, while his hands clutched frantically at the door, it was slammed to and barricaded. He was made a helpless captive. Jesse smiled grimly.

"He can taste of his own medicine now," commented the bandit king.

"Good enough for him," declared Dick Little.

"Now, boys," briskly pursued the leader, "there is no more for us to do here. We are winners of riches galore, and we want to hustle while night is with us. Gather up the plunder and let us be off. We will soon shake this town forever."

Leaving his men to gather up the complete plunder, Jesse went up-stairs. He could dimly see the figures of his men who had been set by the outer door as watchers, but he did not heed them. He moved toward the rear office.

He was slightly surprised because Frank had made no light, but he gave the matter only passing attention. He entered the office. All was quiet there and he could see nothing.

"Frank!" he spoke.

There was no reply.

"Have you gone to sleep?" he added.

Still no answer.

"Come, don't play any jokes," pursued Jesse. "This is no time for nonsense; we must up and away. Come out of your corner. It is I—Jesse James! Say something."

The bandit was growing uneasy without exactly knowing why.

It was not like Frank to be silent and eccentric in time of danger, and he did not understand why he was ignored now. His nervousness was suddenly added to as a voice half whispered at his very elbow.

"Death never talks much!"

Jesse leaped back.

The voice did not sound like Frank's; the words were ominous, and he was startled by the solemn utterance.

"What!" he ejaculated.

"Jesse James, are you prepared to die?" pursued the unseen man.

"To die!"

"So I said."

"Who speaks to me?"

"Death!"

The bandit was still shaken, but he rallied to meet the emergency. Angrily he demanded:

"What in perdition do you mean? Who are you?"

A hand was placed on his arm and the voice grew intense as its owner deeply exclaimed:

"My name is Carl Greene!"

Jesse tried to leap back, but the hand held him fast.

"What?" he breathed.

"We meet again and this time you are mine. I am indeed Carl Greene, and I am now in power. Try to escape me and you die."

A cold, hard substance touched the bandit's cheek.

"Be still or you die!" repeated his companion.

"You need not say that over any more; are you really Carl Greene? How did you come here if you are? Destruction, what evil luck sent you to this place?"

"It was the act of fate, Jesse James; it was ordained that I was to be your daily terror, and I am fulfilling my destiny. Now the chase ends, for I have you secure. Frank James is my captive, and you fall into the same list. Yield!"

"To you?"

"Yes."

"With all my men near?"

"Yes."

"Never!"

"What will you do?"

"This!"

Quickly the detective twisted his foot around Jesse's legs. With a skillful motion he threw the bandit, and then fell heavily upon him; holding him fast, he added:

"Yield or die!"

Jesse was once more himself; freed from his superstitious terrors, he grew to be the resolute raider, and it was a pleasure to have Carl Greene with him. Fiercely he exclaimed:

"You shall have all you want of experience with Jesse James!"

With a tremendous contortion of the body he half threw Carl off and then grappled with him. The old foes began to roll about the office like panthers fighting to the death. In his frenzy to do harm to the man-hunter, Jesse forgot that his followers were within easy call; he thought only of subduing the man he hated.

Unfortunately for Carl, the other bandits were so close that they could not fail to hear the sounds of strife, and they came crowding into the room.

"What is it?" demanded one of the number.

"Bring a light!" roared Jesse.

"What is wrong?" pursued the previous speaker.

"Bring a light, you fool, and ask no more!" hotly returned the bandit king.

Ed McMillan had hastened to obey the order at the start, and he returned with long steps. When he entered the room a remarkable scene was revealed, as the combatants were still rolling about.

"Carl Greene!" gasped Clell Miller.

Stupidly the amazed robbers gazed.

"Shoot him!" shouted Jesse.

It was a moment of acute danger for the detective, but he was a man who never weakened. His courage remained good, and his wits were not affected injuriously; well did he know he must get out of such dangerous company at once, for it would be death to him. He moved accordingly.

With a quick motion he writhed from Jesse's grasp and gained his feet. His revolver came out promptly; he turned it on one of the bandits.

Bang!

The light was shattered into many pieces and darkness fell again.

Bang!

Bang!

"Ouch! I am hit!" cried Wood Hite.

Bang!

Bang!

Carl was busy, but Jesse came to his feet, wild with rage.

"You fools!" he shouted. "Will you let him do it all? Where are your revolvers? Fire! fire!"

The leader had been fumbling for his own weapon, and as he brought it out he lost no time in turning it on the detective.

Bang!

Bang!

Two shots he fired, and then all the bandits came into the case. They leveled their weapons and pressed trigger rapidly. Lead flew like hail and the uproar was great. Until the weapons were emptied there was no cessation of the fusillade.

"Bring another light!" then shouted Jesse.

This duty had been thought of before by one of the band, and he now came hurrying in with the lamp. Its light revealed a good deal, but not so much as was desired. All looked around for Carl Greene, but they did not see him.

They were alone in the room.

"Gone!" gasped Jesse.

"Where?"

"See yonder window."

"He has escaped and gone for help. We shall all be captured."

CHAPTER V.

WILD SCENES.

The same idea was in the mind of each bandit, and that was that the detective had hastened away to summon the citizens to seize them. This thought Jesse put into words, and then Cole Younger exclaimed:

"Let us be off!"

"Follow me!"

Jesse turned to the door, and his men began to troop after him. A deep groan checked them.

"What was that?" demanded Jesse.

"A man under the table!"

"Why, it is Frank James."

"Ha! we had forgotten him! Save him!"

Willing hands grasped Frank's legs, and he was dragged out from his unwelcome resting place. He was bound and gagged, but they quickly released him. He was so eager to talk that he could hardly express himself after the contraction of his jaws.

"Perdition! why didn't you kill the villain?" he gasped.

"We tried."

"You shot like old women!"

"Why didn't you do the job yourself?"

"Carl took me unawares. He beat me down. The girl has gone for help."

"Help for Carl?"

"Yes."

"Thunder! we must get out of here!" exclaimed Jesse.

"Carl hurried her off, and she promised to call all the citizens and have us seized."

"That settles one point. We must hustle away without delay."

"Come on!"

Frank moved toward the door, and the others were not reluctant to go where he led. It had been bad enough before, but when they knew the girl had been allowed so much of a start it was very much worse.

But little more remained to be done, and the robbers hurried out of the building.

"I reckon we are in good time," said Cole Younger. "I do not see any stir hereabouts."

"Look up the street."

"Ha, a light!"

"Yes, and men back of it. They are on the move!"

"It was to be expected. Still the light is not near us. Boys," added Jesse, "make a brisk run for the horses. Away!"

They started as ordered, but only a few paces had been taken when a clear cry rose close at hand.

"Halt!"

"Say, they are onto us."

"Keep up the run."

"Halt, or we fire!"

Again the bandits disobeyed the command, and the rival party lost no more time.

Their threat was kept.

Bang! bang! bang!

"Run!" cried Frank. "That was fearful close."

"Forward! Seize the outlaws!"

"That was the voice of Carl Greene!"

"Yes, he leads them, and that means a hot chase."

Bang! bang! bang!

All around the fugitives pattered the bullets, but that only spurred them on to fresh endeavor. Straight toward the horses they went, and they proved able to hold their own in the race.

Better still, the men left with the animals came to meet them with the whole troop, and the bandits leaped to their saddles.

"We win!" cried Jim Cummins.

"They never can run us down now," added Jack Keene.

"Their legs are not equal to those of the horses."

There was contentment in all these cries, but they were not yet clear of danger.

"Look!" abruptly directed Clell Miller.

"Where?"

"To the east."

"What! other horsemen?"

"Yes."

"They must be a part of our foes."

"Away!" commanded Jesse. "Ride for your lives!"

Speedily the bandits got up speed, but they were not quicker than the other riders. Close in the rear came the enemy.

Crack!

It was a single shot, and the bullet went wide, but it made the fugitives look anxious. Well they might, for it was the opening gun of the campaign, and the others came swift and thick.

Crack!

Crack!

Crack!

Frank shivered.

"I am no coward," he muttered, "but this is too warm for my appetite. Death deals in bullets this night."

The bandit chief, however, was making no mistake. He had figured on certain possibilities.

Their own horses were fairly good animals and fresh, while, if he

reasoned the matter correctly, those of the pursuers were made up of plow horses and beasts ridden long and hard by Carl Greene and his followers.

Right there the bandit leader pinned his hope, and events justified him in all he reasoned out.

One by one the pursuers began to fall back, and those who kept at the front faltered and lost ground.

All the foremost party finally saw this, and they grew exultant.

Cheerful comments took the place of dismal predictions.

"They give it up!"

This cry finally came from Jack Keene, and as they saw that the enemy had halted wholly, their pent-up feelings found vent in a burst of taunting laughter. This was followed by a cheer.

"Hurrah for the James Boys! Hurrah, hurrah, hurrah!"

Loud rang the shouts, and it could not have been agreeable to Carl Greene. He had lost his prey and was wholly beaten for the time being. But did he despair? The bandits had their answer in the loud cry which floated to them from the rear:

"My turn will come!"

The words cast a momentary gloom over the wild riders. Well did they know the persistence, skill and luck of the indomitable detective, and they felt sure he would make good his threat.

They would see him again.

For a time there was reprieve, and they consulted to see what they would do with the valuable hours. As no especial plan was suggested, they decided that the best they could do was to press on toward safety, and this they proceeded to do.

By dawn they had left the enemy out of sight, but they did not pause until noon. Before that hour they had eaten nothing, but they descended on a herd of cattle, killed one for the present needs, and then took the carcass to a grove, cooked what was required, and made a substantial meal.

A general conversation followed, and it was seen that nearly all were anxious to strike a new blow. Jesse and Frank did not seek to check this impulse, and matters finally took definite form.

The result was that they left the grove shortly before nightfall and rode toward the nearest town. Outside the place they left the horses where they were not likely to be seen while darkness lasted, and then went quickly to the depot.

It was their plan to learn more of the train next due, and then decide as to their course of action.

Jesse questioned an employe.

"How soon is the next train due for the west?"

"Forty minutes."

"Is it a comfortable train?"

"Best on the line."

"Fast?"

"Yes. It carries the fastest locomotive on the road."

"Is it an express?"

"Yes."

"Mail car on it?"

"Yes."

The bandit dared not be more precise with his questions and he soon sauntered away from the employe. The information gained was of a nature to give new strength to the plan of going along on the train and robbing it en route, and he was about to seek his men and lay the facts before them when a close wagon arrived at the depot under guard of four men and drew up at the door of the express office. The regular loungers seemed to understand just what it meant and they drew around the spot with such an air that Jesse's curiosity was aroused. He stepped up to one of the loungers.

"What is that?"

"Don't you know?" asked the man, surprised.

"No."

"That's the road's strong box."

"What is that?"

"Well, you must be a stranger here."

"I am."

"That box is full of cash."

"Oh!"

"Piles of greenbacks."

"What's to be done with it?"

"The workmen on the extension are to be paid off. Every week that box is sent East from Kansas City to where the gang is at work. It is a rich nest-egg."

"So it is going East?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"The train comes along two hours later."

"Ah!"

Jesse spoke mechanically, and soon left the man. He had news for his party, and he proceeded to make it known.

"Say," cried Jim Cummins, "why can't we strike that booty?"

"We are not going East."

"No."

"There is but one way for us to get it," added Jesse.

"What is that?"

"Raid the express office, seize the booty, and then take passage on the west-bound train."

"But how can we work it, if we seize the money?"

"Likewise seize the train when it comes."

"Whew! but that would be a bold push!" exclaimed Bill Chadwell.

"The whole town, as well as the train crew, would be on top of us," added Bob Younger.

"Then the verdict is that we do not take it?" asked Jesse.

"I say, take it!" cried Jack Keene.

"The same here," added Ed McMillan.

The current was started, and whenever it once got to flowing the bandits were reckless enough to agree to any wild scheme. They agreed to this one, and the band set out to do the desperate job.

Desperate it was in the full sense of the word, for, even with the train left wholly out of consideration, it was something like madness, one would say, to try and defy such a town.

Nothing, however, was too wild for the bandits when they set out to do a thing.

Lawless deeds were not common in the place, and, though they had just taken in such a valuable box, the express agents did not close the office, but stood in the door and awaited the arrival of the west-bound train.

It was almost due when four men walked quietly up to the employes.

"We expect a parcel here," said one, who was Jesse himself.

"Has it arrived?"

"What name?"

"Jason True."

"I will look."

The speaker stepped fully inside, and the four men would have followed quietly had not the second employe tried to stop them.

"No admittance here," he announced.

"Why not?" replied Jesse. "We work for this railroad to-night. Here is my badge," and he pulled out a revolver and raised the hammer.

CHAPTER VI.

THE BANDITS' WILD NIGHT.

The railroad man found the revolver presented to his face with grim seriousness which was discomfiting to his nerves.

"What's that?" he cried.

"Hands up!" replied Jesse James, sharply.

"See here, this is a mighty poor joke, and——"

"There is no joke about it, as you will learn. Put up your hands, or I will blow out your brains!"

With this Jesse suddenly thrust out his free hand and forced the man back until the door could be closed. This he did almost in the same breath, and the two employes were shut in with the four bandits.

Jim Cummins had covered the second agent, and Frank James and Jack Keene made a dive for the treasure box and secured the coveted booty.

"Robbers!" exclaimed the first agent, catching the idea.

"That's just what we are," agreed Jesse. "We are here to get this box, and we are going to have it. If you value your lives you will not oppose us."

"Give up that box?"

"Yes."

"Never!"

"Oh! but you will."

"We will die first."

"Just as you say. Take your pick. We are going to have the box, anyhow. If you want to die, all you need to do is to say so; we don't care a rap. Boys, is it heavy?"

This question was asked of Jim and Jack.

"We can lift it," answered Jim.

"Be ready when the train comes, then."

The employes had been bewildered, but they began to recover their self-possession a trifle.

They were as zealous to discharge their duty well as was the average man, and they now began to think of resistance. Inside the office it was four to two, but was not the depot filled with loungers—honest citizens, who would not see robbery done?

One of them tried to act on this thought.

"Robbers!" he suddenly shouted. "Help! This way——"

Like a panther Jim Cummins leaped upon him. The experienced bandit seized the agent's throat, and then forced him to the floor. Jesse again clapped the revolver to his head.

"One more sound and you die!" hissed the robber leader.

It was an ominous situation, and the employe did not underestimate it. He groaned dismally, and then relapsed into silence.

Jesse nodded to his own followers, and all moved with celerity. Ropes were produced, and these were adjusted to the wrists of the railroad men with great quickness. When gags had been added the work was all done.

"Neatly executed!" commented the bandit king. "We are masters here, and nothing remains but to get the box away. No alarm has been heard, and it is about time for the train. When it comes——"

Toot, toot!

"The train!" exclaimed Jack Keene.

Toot, toot! With a roar the locomotive and its cars rolled into the depot, and the critical moment was at hand.

Before coming to the final decision, the plan of the bandits had been fully marked out, and at this time all knew what to do. There was no need of consultation, and none took place.

As the conductor of the train strolled toward the express office, Jim Cummins went out and met him. Careless and cool was the manner of the robber.

"Nothing from here," he observed, quietly. "You can go on as soon as you please."

"Nothing?" replied the conductor, surprised.

"No."

"Business must have taken a sudden drop."

"It has."

Men from the express car were moving toward the spot, but Jim had his eyes open, and he shut them off in the same way. Considerably surprised, they, too, turned back, and then each began to attend to his duties. The conductor saw to the passengers, while the trunks and other things were swung from the truck to the baggage car with the usual wild recklessness of railroad employes.

Closely Jesse watched from the express office, and when the proper moment seemed to have come, he spoke to his followers:

"Put out the box!"

It was raised and carried out boldly. Straight toward one of the cars went the bandits, and for some time all went well with them. But such a step could not go through without discovery.

One of the loungers noticed that the treasure box, which was to go east, was being put on the west-bound train by total strangers, while the regular express agents were not to be seen. He mentioned this fact to a fellow lounge; that person mentioned it to a third lounge; the information spread, and the hum of voices soon told that the news was general.

One man ran to the express office. He found the agents rolling about in a wild effort to free themselves from their bonds; he ran in and cast off the gags.

"Robbers!" gasped the agent.

The lounge hastened out.

"Robbers!" he yelled.

The box was lifted to the car by Jim Cummins and Jack Keene.

"Robbers!" went the cry through the depot.

"The James Boys are here!"

The person who added this startling information did so without any evidence to back up his claim. He thought it a good rallying cry; he sounded it without knowing how near he came to the truth.

"The James Boys are here!"

So whispered the crowd in hushed accents, for they were scared by the announcement. Not so the trainmen. Hearing the cries they stopped short, and things were at a lull.

All this had been thought of as a possibility by the bandits, and they knew just what to do. Ed McMillan, Bill Chadwell and Dick Little were near the locomotive. They leaped forward and the engineer found three revolvers bearing upon him.

"Pull the throttle open!" commanded Ed.

The engineer gazed at the speaker defiantly.

"I'll see you in perdition first!" he retorted.

"Obey or die!"

"I will not."

"Then take the consequences."

Bang!

Ed fired, and the engineer reeled back and fell in the cab. Dick leaped in after him, followed by Ed and Bill. Quickly Dick took measures to start the train, while the other bandits turned their weapons on the fireman.

"Will you do your work here, or shall we shoot you, too?"

The fireman was not of heroic mold. He was pale, and his voice trembled as he answered:

"Gentlemen. I—I do not want to have any trouble!"

"Then do your regular duties well! Bill, remember you are to stay and keep him covered."

"Yes, Ed, they are fighting!"

Bang, bang, bang! rang the revolvers in the depot.

"Quick, Ed, you will be needed!"

Ed bent over the engineer. He saw that, though the man was not capable of mischief, there was a good deal of life still left in him, and he swung the employe around and dropped him to the floor of the station. Then Ed left the cab to Dick and Bill just as the train began to move. Dick was at the throttle, and he well knew how to run the train.

The fight mentioned by the men was more serious than they had supposed. Everybody seemed to have taken a hand in it, and the reign of bullets was on. It looked likely to be a fight to a finish then, indeed, and with the bandits so far outnumbered, the result seemed to be ominous in its portent.

But the bandits relied on getting out of the depot with their stolen train, and they were conducting themselves to gain that end as Ed joined them. Frank James saw him.

"All well, Ed?"

"Yes."

"Dick at the throttle?"

"Yes."

"Then we win. Are we all here?"

"I think so."

"Where is Jesse?"

Just then Oll Sheppard rushed forward. He was covered with tell-tale red stains, and seemed hardly able to walk.

"Ruin!" he gasped.

"What is it?"

"Jesse is gone."

"Where?"

"Down the track."

"Why?"

"They captured him."

Frank pulled Oll aboard the moving train, and with his own hand on the bell-cord, to stop the train if necessary, he added:

"Explain! Be quick."

"Jesse and I fought side by side," panted Oll. "We were forced out of the depot in the melee, and they grew mad over our stout resistance. Jesse was overpowered, and the foe, acting on a wild impulse, bound him to the pilot of a locomotive which stood in the yard, opened the throttle and let the engine go."

"Where?" thundered Frank.

"West."

"Do you mean the engine has run away with Jesse on it?"

"Yes."

"Bound to the pilot?"

"Yes."

"Nobody in the cab?"

"Nobody. The engine is running wild."

The bandits stood in stupefied dismay. They knew very well what that meant. The runaway locomotive was speeding along ahead of them, and it went without any hand at the throttle. That it would go to destruction seemed sure.

"He goes to his destruction," cried Frank. "He is, of course, wholly helpless, and the engine will rush on until it runs into something and is wrecked. Then Jesse, being in front, will be ground to a jelly in the collision."

Nobody vouchsafed a reply.

No one could see ground for hope, and they were simply appalled by this new calamity.

Toot, toot!

"Hark!" cried Cole, "there is a whistle. We must be near Jesse."

"To me it seemed to come from the rear," replied Jim Cummins.

He moved down to the lowest step, and then swung himself as far out as possible, holding to the hand-rail.

"Thunder!" he then cried.

"What is it?"

"Another train rushing along after us."

"Another train?"

"Yes."

"How can that be?"

"I know not, but it is there, and—— Perdition!"

"What now?"

"A man swings himself off as I have done; he looks ahead as I now look back!"

"What of that?"

"We know him!"

"Who is it?"

"Carl Greene!"

"What?"

"It is Carl Greene, I say! I am not mistaken; it is so."

"A pursuing train, with him on it. What does it mean?"

"A train chartered by him to follow us generally, perhaps, and all too successful in happening on us just now. Anyhow, he is there, and we have Carl as a pursuer on the rail."

"Think of what we have ahead."

"Think of what we have in the rear!"

The bandits gazed blankly at each other; it was, indeed, a wild

and thrilling scene. First of all went Jesse, bound and helpless on the wild engine; then came the regular train with the bandits, and in the rear Carl Greene thundering along in pursuit.

"This is our worst hour on the rail," muttered Frank, unsteadily. "See!" exclaimed Jack Keene, "the passengers are in consultation. We shall have a new fight on yet."

Frank James aroused, and his eyes glittered with burning light. "Quell them!" he cried. "We have enough of trouble without enduring difficulty from these fellows. Into the car, and let them be subdued in a twinkling!"

He threw open the car door.

Bang!

One of the passengers took a shot at him, and his hat was perforated by the bullet.

"Down with them!" shouted Frank.

"Death to the outlaws!" was the cry from the passengers.

"Give them all they want," directed Frank, quickly. "This rebellion on their part must be put down immediately. Somebody is to be masters here. It is not ourselves we are gone up sure."

All realized the truth of this assertion, and nobody was backward in obeying. There was a forward rush, and all the while the rival forces were busy with their weapons.

Free was the discharge from all quarters.

Bang!

Bang!

Bang!

For a while it seemed as if the bandits had undertaken more than they could perform, but they had the advantage of long experience in this line, and they held to the work so grimly that the courage of the passengers failed just when they were really the surest of victory.

They broke and fled toward the rear cars.

"Pursue!" called out Frank. "They must be whipped once and for all. More, they must be disarmed!"

"Hurrah for the James Boys!" yelled the bandits, and they hotly followed the fugitives.

It seemed that the fighting men had been gathered in the car first attacked, for in the next were non-combatants and men who seemed frightened out of their wits.

"Spare the women and children!" shouted one of this party.

"Down with the James Boys!" ordered one of the previous fighters.

Bang! bang! again spoke the revolvers, and lead flew thick and fast.

CHAPTER VII.

THE RACE ON THE RAIL.

It was not the fault of the bandits that the fight was reopened, and in a way threatening danger to the women and children. It was not their wish to struggle further, and the plea of the peace-desiring man would have been heeded by them; but when others among the passengers took up the mantle of war the wild raiders were not backward.

Bang!

Bang!

Bang!

Thick came the bullets, and the screams of the women and children were painful to hear, but Frank James determined to end it at once.

"Charge!" he commanded, in a ringing voice.

Through the aisle swept the marauders. For a moment the foe stood before them, and there was some fighting hand to hand, but it could not last. Again the enemy fled, this time more panic-stricken than before.

They were hotly pursued, and they had no sooner reached the next car than they evinced a change of purpose. Revolvers were cast away, and they tried to gain seats unseen and pose as men new to the presence of the robbers.

Frank was not deceived, but, seeing that the mutiny was over, he gave orders to his followers which were promptly obeyed. They went through the several cars on what Jack Keene termed a mission of business and pleasure combined. In other words they took away the weapons, money and watches of the passengers.

When this was done they were complete masters of the train, and there appeared to be no way for the opposing force to inflict damage on them. Guards were, however, posted where they could watch everything, and then the rest of the bandits gathered for consideration of the more serious problems before them.

There was a glorious moon and it gave view far and near, but thus far it had showed no more than was before known.

Carl Greene's train was chasing them hotly, but nothing had been seen of the "wild" engine.

"Boys," said Cole Younger, "something must be done."

"What?" asked Jim Cummins.

"Yes, what can be done?" added Ed McMillan.

All looked at Frank James, but he stood gazing ahead of the train with his brows knit in a deep, thoughtful scowl.

"Frank, have you an idea?" asked Cole.

"We must do something for Jesse."

"Name it."

"I don't see the way."

"Nor I."

"It is terrible to think of him bound to the pilot of that engine, helpless as a child, and rushing on to his fate. At any moment the engine may run full tilt into something and crush Jesse into a shapeless mass of flesh."

"Yes."

"Can't we put on more steam and overtake him?" inquired Clell Miller, eagerly.

"Suppose we did. How could we get at him?"

No one answered this question; and, indeed, it seemed to be unanswerable.

To overtake the runaway was one thing—to rescue Jesse was quite a different matter.

"Hark!" suddenly exclaimed Jim. "Did you hear that?"

"What?"

"Sounded like a rifle shot."

"So it did to me."

"There it goes again."

"It's from the rear."

"Ha! Carl Greene is taking a little practice out of us."

This thought was enough to send Frank and Cole back to the rear of their own train, and they found that some man had taken place on the tender of the pursuing train, and was trying his skill as a marksman.

A bullet cut through Cole's hair as they gazed.

"By Jove! Let me get a rifle myself, and I will make him hunt his hole!" exclaimed the lieutenant.

"No," said Frank, "we can't afford to bother with the fellow. He will soon stop it, for wiser heads than his on the train must see they are more likely to hit women or children by that sort of shooting than any one else. Let us——"

Clell Miller hurriedly appeared.

"We have sighted Jesse!" he announced.

"How?"

"The wild engine is in sight."

"We must see to that."

Forward the leaders went, and they found that it was all true.

The runaway locomotive was directly ahead. It was going at considerable speed, but not so fast as the regular train.

Of course Jesse could not be seen from where they were.

Frank and Cole crawled over the tender and joined Dick Little and Bill Chadwell in the cab.

"What are the chances, Dick?" asked Frank.

"I have had to ease up a bit to keep from running into her," replied the bandit engineer.

"I will do it!"

"What, Frank?"

"Try to board her."

"You will?"

"It is the only way to save Jesse."

"A hazardous attempt."

"It must be tried."

Frank cast off his coat.

The moon made all things as plain as day, and it was a thrilling sight to see such a scene under way as the iron horses flashed on their course.

Again the two engines were within a few feet of each other.

"Don't be reckless!" shouted Cole Younger from the cab window.

Frank James did not reply. He had every nerve set for the desperate venture ahead of him, and he was ready to risk all. Jesse must be saved. With a cat-like propulsion of his body the bandit took the leap.

He reached the foremost cab, but did it with the impetus of both machines to contend with. He was sent rolling like a top, but it was in his favor that he rolled forward. He brought up with a crash, shaken but not injured.

He was quickly on his feet.

"Hurrah, hurrah!"

Cole Younger sounded the cry exultantly, but Frank did not pause to answer. Quickly he put his head out of the cab window.

Jesse was still on the pilot, bound and helpless.

"Jesse, I am coming!" shouted the bandit.

The captive turned his head. There was no sign of hope on his face, and it was clear that he saw nothing in the shout; the words had not been distinguished.

Frank waited for no more, but hastened to complete his task.

He was soon beside Jesse, and then the latter was, indeed, surprised. He stared as if he could not believe the evidence of his eyes.

"Cheer up!" called out Frank. "I will have you clear in a twinkling."

Knife in hand the speaker bent over his comrade, but as he did so there was a roaring sound close at hand and another locomotive began to pass their own on the other track, but moving the same way.

Frank stopped in blank wonder. What did it mean? Was it the cab of the regular train? If so, how had it gained position on the second track? He soon had an answer.

The window of the other cab came into view; he saw the men who were there, and they were not Dick and the other bandits.

Still gained the strangers, and then the last doubt vanished. The tender came opposite Frank, and he almost fell from the pilot as he saw the face of Carl Greene so close to his own. A smile hovered the detective's face.

"How are you, Frank James?" was the triumphant greeting.

Frank stood speechless.

"Come over here!" suggested Carl, with a grain of malicious mirth.

"Devil!" shouted Frank, "are you omnipresent?"

"Candidly, I am."

"How did you get there?"

"Pulled up at Crosstown and took this track. Very simple."

"Fiend!"

"Oh, come now, don't be hard on so old a friend. I keep within the limits of the law. Do you?"

Frank was not disposed to bandy words at this juncture. He was almost overwhelmed by the discovery of this new peril, for he saw that the detective could do untold damage from his present position. Indeed, it looked as if Carl was absolute monarch of all around."

"Quick!" cried Jesse. "Release me!"

Frank James bent forward, knife in hand, but Carl suddenly presented a revolver.

"Stop!" he ordered. "If you try to liberate him I will shoot you!"

Stubbornly Frank held to his task. A few sweeps of his knife and the ropes fell away. Jesse leaped to his feet.

Bang!

Bang!

The detective was seeking to keep his threat and the bullets tore through Frank's clothes. A little more and he would have gone to death on the rail, but he saved himself by dropping to the pilot and clinging fast.

Jesse was mad with rage. When he was captured he had not been disarmed and he now drew a revolver with a spiteful jerk.

"Carl Greene," he thundered, "you have come once too often. Die, villain, die!"

He pulled the trigger with fingers which itched for Carl's blood and the detective dropped to the tender.

"At last, at last!" shouted Jesse, in wild glee.

"Not yet!" retorted Carl, and he raised his own hand.

Bang! It was a shot from Carl.

Bang! It was a shot from Jesse.

Bang!

Bang!

Viciously the old rivals did their work, but their cartridges gave out and the firing ceased for the time. Frank rose and seized his comrade's arm."

"Back!" he ordered. "Carl has other men with him. We shall be killed if we stay here. Back to the cab!"

He pulled stoutly and Jesse was not reluctant to obey. He had noticed the other men by Carl's side, and though they had thus far taken no part in the fight, it was evident that they would shortly come into the game. Led by Frank the bandit king hastened toward the cab and he gained it none too soon. Just as they passed the pilot the firing became general and Frank was scratched by one of the leaden missiles.

"Drop!" he ordered, as they reached the cab.

Both the bandits hastened to shelter themselves in the new refuge.

"They can't get a bead on us here," said Frank.

"How came Carl here?" raved Jesse, who was greatly wrought up.

"I don't know."

"Did he drop out of the sky?"

Frank told all he could, both of Carl and of the situation of their own command. Jesse listened, and grew calmer as the story progressed.

"Well, this is a novel situation," he remarked, thoughtfully.

"It is indeed! What are we to do?"

"If we could only wreck Carl's train?"

"Can we?"

"I see no way."

"We can throw nothing on his track. We are helpless now."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BANDITS' RETREAT.

It was a period of downheartedness for the James Boys, but Jesse suddenly brightened up.

"There may be hope yet," he said, quickly.

"How?"

"Carl's train is making big time."

"Yes."

"It could not be stopped in a twinkling."

"No."

"Suppose we signal to the boys on the regular train, and then have them slow up simultaneously with us. Would not the rival force be sufficiently slow to catch onto our plan so we could slacken speed and then leap off before Carl could do the same trick?"

"Jesse, you have it!" cried Frank.

Signals were exchanged between the comrades, and then Dick Little suddenly shut off steam. Jesse and Frank watched sharply, and when they saw the momentum of the rearmost train begin to be lost, they did the same with the detached cab and both gradually lost speed.

Keenly Carl's train had been watched. All depended on whether they were quick to notice the change. But Carl's train forged ahead and the bandits grew exultant.

"We win!" cried Frank.

"Carl catches the idea now."

"They slacken, or, at least, shut off steam."

"But they still draw away from us."

"Now is our time. Get to the step, Frank; we can make the leap!"

Looking back the bandit king saw that his other followers were ready to leap, and he and Frank gained the desired position.

There was no longer danger in jumping, and the whole party went dropping to the ground. The engines were left alone, nearly at a standstill.

Cole Younger came running to Jesse's side.

"Are all out?" demanded Jesse.

"Yes."

"Into the woods then!"

"Do you know the place?"

"No; do you?"

"None of us do."

"It does not matter. What of the money in the strong-box of the railroad company?"

"I obeyed you, broke the box open, and divided the funds so we could carry all easily."

"Good! Into the woods, boys!"

"Carl and his men are jumping off their train."

"Let them jump. We will lead them a pretty chase."

The bandits hurried into the bushes.

"Thunder! but ain't it dark!" exclaimed Jim Cummins.

"That need not trouble us. We can run as fast as Carl can pursue."

It was not many minutes before the bandits were rather inclined to doubt the truth of this statement. There was a crashing of the bushes behind them which told that the pursuers were under way, and when the fugitives put on speed and tried to outrun them, the sounds continued alarmingly near.

"They run like sprinters," commented Jesse.

"We shall have to outwit them," suggested Frank.

"How?"

"By hiding."

"We are so many that they might not pass us without discovery."

"Take to the trees," said Cole Younger.

"A good plan," agreed Jesse. "Try it, boys! Now! Shinny up wherever you can find a place."

The strong-limbed bandits carried out the scheme with promptness, and all were soon ensconced in the high refuge. It was done none too soon, for the pursuers came on swiftly, and the crashing of their steps was all around the hiding men. Then they heard a voice.

"Hang it all, this is the roughest traveling I have seen."

"It is just as bad for the outlaws."

"They do well to run."

"Say, but ain't we got them well scared!"

"What's all this talk about?" demanded another voice.

The bandits held their breath.

It was Carl Greene who had spoken last, and he was directly under the trees where they were secreted.

"Nothing, captain," was the answer.

"No idle talk, then, but just keep them moving."

"Shall we beat up the vicinity?" asked the subordinate.

"No; do you see anything in this tree?"

"Only blackness."

"Is not that a figure, human or animal?"

"I see nothing."

"I could easily learn."

Click—click!

Carl raised the hammer of his revolver.

"Blaze away," suggested his follower.

"I reckon it is only a big branch, yet a shot will settle it. I will see what a bullet will do to it."

Carl held his arm up and took aim, ready to carry out his plan, but just then there was a diversion in advance.

Bang!

Bang, bang, bang!

"Ha!" cried Carl, "they must have run onto the foe. Away, men, and let us be in at the death!"

The dark something in the tree was forgotten, and Carl and his followers raced away. Jesse drew a deep breath.

"A close call!" he muttered.

"Did he really see us?" inquired Cole.

"If his revolver didn't bear on me I am a liar," returned the bandit king. "I was just going to forestall him and take a shot when the interruption came."

"It was a false alarm."

"Surely, for none of us are over there. Some fellow saw his own shadow and tried to wing it. Boys, this is our time. Slide down from the trees and get away. Down!"

Quickly but quietly the bandits obeyed, and all were soon on the ground. Jesse did not let them linger, but taking a course at right angles with that they had been pursuing, they hastened off. For awhile they could hear the movements of the enemy, and then all became quiet. They had shaken off the detective and his men.

Their success did not make them rash, and they tramped on for a long while. They wished to see the end of the woods before they stopped, but they finally grew so leg-weary that they gave it up and camped on a dry knoll.

There they spent the rest of the night, sleeping soundly, reckless of danger, but safe enough, as it proved.

The sun was up when they woke.

"Well, here we are," continued Jesse, "houseless, homeless, and minus breakfast. What are we to do?"

"How deep are we in the woods?"

"Unless this forest runs right on to Arkansas, we must be about out," replied Cole Younger.

"Face south and march on. We must have something to eat."

"Hush!" enjoined Cole. "Here comes a darky. We can interview him."

"Let me see him alone; the trees will screen the rest of you, and he need not know we number so many."

The colored man was pursuing his way with a happy face and a careless song. Jesse accosted him.

"Hallo, uncle!"

"Hullo, boss!" was the ready reply.

"What's going on there?"

"Golly, don't you know?"

"No."

"You must be a stranger."

"I am."

"Dat air is de boss show."

"Oh, is it?"

"Yes, sah. De hossmen, dey have got tergeter ter show their hosses, swap hosses, tell lies about hosses, an' all dat sort o' truck. There will be more lyin' dan anything else. Hi, hi, hi!"

Cheerfully the darky laughed, and Jesse grew more confident.

"Only a horse show, eh?"

"Dat's all."

"What is the programme for to-day?"

"Waal, sah, they is about a-goin' ter have they breakfas'. Den dey will smoke their pipes an' tell hoss lies, an' of all lies the hoss lie is de boss. It's allus born full age an' strength, ye see. Then the hosses will be put on exhibition, an' Fairy Lillian an' Stupid Sam will give their great hoss act."

"How is that?"

"Them two is expert hoss riders."

"I see."

"Between the showin' of the hosses an' the acts by Lillian an' Sam, the day will pass. Then the men will smoke an' tell lies all the rest o' the time."

"Ah! I suppose there is a hotel here?"

"Bless ye, sah, there is two, an' there is booths all around, besides, where man an' beast kin get co'n bread, bakin an' de likes

o' that. Oh! nobody need starve here, ef he has money an' kin tell hoss lies, sah."

The negro had served his purpose, and Jesse proceeded to drop him gently. He went his way, and the bandit returned to his comrades, who had been listening to all.

"Well," he said, "what do you think?"

"I say, sail in and try that 'bakin and co'n bread,'" cried Jack Keene. "My commissary department needs it."

"I grant that we must feed. What shall we do then?"

"Attend the horse show."

"We know a bit about horses."

A laugh from the men showed that this sally was understood.

"And we may need horses a little later on," added Clell Miller.

"That's just it," gravely pursued Jesse. "Here we are, we don't know where, without horseflesh to separate our feet. It seems to me that if we linger around until night we may be able to get what we need cheap."

"Ha, ha! You have hit it, Jesse."

"Do we carry out this plan?"

"Anyhow," put in Frank, "let us get something to eat. Then we can see what is best for us."

"Are all agreed?"

"Yes."

"Then go to the town. Separate into parties of four or five, so no especial attention will be drawn to us. Move on!"

In a few minutes the bandits reached the collection of new structures.

Early as they were, the eating places were open, and other men were testing them.

The bandits went ahead and satisfied their now lively appetites.

This done, they gave heed to the minute things of the town.

Their first impression was that there was little there to interest them, as they had no horses and could not compete; but when the place had fully warmed up, as it were, they found that the town was no sleepy borough.

The strangers, if not the citizens, were there for fun, and they lost no occasion to get it.

Trades, big stories, and a few quarrels enlivened proceedings.

Later, the expert horse riders appeared on the scene.

The bandits then found something of interest to themselves.

CHAPTER IX.

JESSE MAKES HIS MARK.

There was no need of asking who the woman and the man who appeared on the scene were. The bandits could tell at first glance after the talk with the colored boy. They knew they were looking on Fairy Lillian and Stupid Sam. The latter received but little attention from the comrades; all eyes were fixed on Lillian.

"Whew, but ain't she a daisy!" exclaimed Jim Cummins.

"Face like a Venus!" declared Frank.

"Form like a queen!" added Jack Keene.

"Rides like a Centaur!" put in Jesse.

Their comments did not see misapplied, for the woman certainly did make a fine appearance. She was young and dashing, and the bandits could appreciate that kind of woman.

She and Sam were at the fair simply to make things pleasant for the men, and they proceeded to do their duty. Trick riding was indulged in freely, and they received proper homage from the onlookers.

Sam was stupid only in the role he played. He was dressed like a clown, and began clumsily, but soon proved that he was a fine rider.

The James Boys watched closely.

"They are from some circus," suggested Cole.

"She may be," replied Jesse, "but that fellow is not."

"Why do you think so?"

"He isn't good enough."

"He rides well."

"Bah! Just like a farmer boy!"

Some of the bandits smiled. They had noticed that Jesse regarded handsome Lillian with unusual admiration, and they suspected he was jealous of the man who rode by her side.

The forenoon passed, and Carl did not come.

The hour for the second appearance of the fancy riders was three o'clock, and when it neared the time all the other amusements were forgotten, and the horsemen waited to see the exponents of the art of fine riding.

Jesse stood with his forehead knitted into a scowl, and seemed to find the matter more serious than anybody else. His interest in Lillian was to be judged by these signs.

Presently the riders came forth mounted. Both were graceful

and spirited, and there was a murmur of approbation from the regular spectators.

Their work began.

"Destruction take the fellow!" cried Jesse, after the first event, as he glared at Sam, "he is still ugly. He managed that exhibition so that the girl was overshadowed and he seemed to do all the good work."

"Jesse," urged Cole, "just let them fight it out. We don't want to make ourselves too conspicuous."

"He needs taking down."

"They are both professionals, beyond doubt; let them have it out."

"Humph!"

The leader turned away with a disgusted air, and it was plain to Cole that it would not do to urge him further. Thus, nobody had more to say on the subject, and Jesse was left to his own desires.

Another feature of the show came on, and this time it resulted in utter failure. A skillful piece of work was tried, but the clumsiness of Sam defeated it all, and not only that, but Lillian was thrown from her horse.

A moment more and all was excitement. Her skirt had caught, and her horse became frightened and began to run. He did not go far.

Jesse sprang forward, seized the animal, and brought him to a stop.

Lillian was released. She leaped to her feet, but she did not pause then to thank her rescuer. Instead of being alarmed, her eyes were glittering with anger. She had held to her whip, and she took a few quick steps and gained the side of her partner.

"You villain!" she cried, "you shall pay for all this!"

Swish, swish, swish!

The whip fell again and again on his face before he could make a movement to defend himself. Then his wits returned, and his anger blazed up as hotly as her own.

"Vixen!" he snarled, "you shall pay something, too!"

Dashing at her, he closed his hands around her neck.

"This for her who strikes me!" he shouted.

It was in his mind to do her serious injury, but she was not so helpless as he supposed. Jesse James was there. The sound of a heavy blow came, and Sam dropped to the earth, skillfully felled by the furious bandit.

Sam came up with a murderous light in his eyes.

"Death shall pay for that!" he hissed.

Drawing a knife, he sprang upon the bandit, but Jesse was ready for him, and he had seen more of fighting than the trick rider.

Leaping to one side he avoided the blow, and then he recommenced his onslaught on the would-be assassin. Using only his bare fists, he rained blow after blow on Sam's face. The latter stood up gamely, but he was only a child in Jesse's hands, and he made his punishment all the more severe.

In a few moments his face was stained with red, and when he finally dropped half stunned to the ground, he looked as if an avalanche had struck him.

"Nobly done!"

The words were from Fairy Lillian, and she hastened to take her protector's hand.

"Stranger," she exclaimed, "you are a trump card!"

It was not an elegant expression of feeling, but she meant it all and Jesse was not captious. He held on to her hand and promptly replied:

"Miss, if the debt is not all paid, just say the word and I will hammer him some more."

"I don't want you to soil your hands with his blood. It is ignoble blood and you are not of his stamp."

Jesse experienced a feeling of pleasure at this compliment, but his men were not so much impressed with Fairy Lillian. Pretty she was, but there was an air of hard business in all she said and did, and the opinion was general that she was not much better than her partner. The horsemen were with her, however, as in duty bound, and nobody gave sympathy to Sam. He was carried to a house to recover as nature helped him along.

"Miss," said Jesse, presently, "your act here has been interrupted. I will take that fellow's place and help you out."

"Are you enough at home in the saddle?"

"Yes."

"But you don't know the plan of the features."

"I can do what that knave failed to do," declared Jesse.

"Good! It shall be so."

Lillian's horse was recovered and then Jesse made good his boast. He rode through the act with her and acquitted himself with honor. If he had not the same ways of the trick rider he was equally king of the saddle and he and Lillian received generous applause.

From that time he was known to all in the camp and was a favorite with the impulsive Southerners.

So did he appear to be a favorite with Lillian, for she took him in charge, and the comment was made among the horsemen that she had found a new partner.

The bandits were not well pleased, but they were helpless. Jesse passed the next two hours with the queen of the track, and it was near night when he deigned to rejoin his men. He found serious faces among them and remonstrances came quickly.

He tried to ward off these complaints.

"All ready for supper?" he asked lightly.

"Yes," said Frank.

"I feel like eating."

"What time do we start?"

"Start?"

"Yes."

"What do you mean?"

"At what hour do we leave here?"

"I think we had better rest to-night."

"No, no!" exclaimed Frank.

"Why not?"

"We want to be off."

"Not until to-morrow."

"Jesse, do you forget Carl Greene? He is liable to appear at any minute."

"I think we have thrown him off the scent, and if we have not we can handle the fellow."

"You are mad! This will never do! You know Carl Greene never rests; he surely is on our track now, and if we delay we simply invite sure ruin."

"Nonsense!"

"Jesse, this won't do!"

"See here, am I a child?" cried Jesse.

"You are worse; you are bewitched by a woman!" bluntly replied Frank.

"Nobody can bewitch me," retorted the bandit king, with an air of bravado. "Why will you be so foolish? Just because I help a woman in trouble you indulge in all this wild talk. You are crazy!"

"Didn't we agree to go on our way to-night?"

"Wise people sometimes change their minds."

"But not to a pitch of folly."

"That will do; I want to hear no more nonsense."

"You insist on staying?"

"Yes."

"We are going on."

"Go ahead."

"Come, Jesse, this is folly."

"If you want to go, go ahead—I won't. More. I have talked all I will about the matter. You can have it out with the rest of the know-it-alls. Let me alone!"

With this curt retort Jesse walked off, and the men were left to deal with the subject alone. As none of the rest of them shared Fairy Lillian's friendship, none was in favor of remaining where they were, and the result was an animated conversation on the subject. Some were in favor of deserting Jesse, but old ties were strong, and no action of the sort were taken.

When night fell all the bandits were in town, and they did not say much more about going, though all indulged in dismal forebodings.

Jesse saw only Lillian, but they saw Carl Greene in every moving shadow.

They respected the valor, if not the cause, of the indomitable detective.

Sam had recovered in a measure from his hurts, but he did not go near the girl. Thus, there was no opposition when Lillian and Jesse had supper together. Later, Jesse came to his men, and they noticed that his mood was not so buoyant as it had been. He explained nothing, but the fact was that Lillian had not been so amiable to him as before. The girl had her living to get; her trouble with Sam was of trivial nature, and she was quite as much to blame for the outbreak as he, if he had evinced such an abominable spirit as the difficulty went on; and now that she had time to think she was not so well pleased with having been so severe with him.

Thus, she failed to give Jesse the same number of sweet words she had showered on him at first.

Having left her, he sulked for a time in camp. He wanted to back out of his position, but was too proud to do it, since his men could not fail to understand the cause.

Later on, however, a messenger came from Lillian.

"The lady wants you, sir," said the man.

Jesse suddenly brightened. After all, it might be only a woman's whim which had made her curt to him. He would return and see if she were penitent.

He went; he was cordially received; he sat down and basked in the light of her smile; he was happy as he saw her fair face.

There was another face he did not see. There was much he did not know. More, a trap lurked for his unwary feet. Danger was there, unseen, but close at hand.

CHAPTER X.

JESSE PAYS THE PENALTY.

"Welcome!" cried Fairy Lillian. "I am over feeling tired, and I grew so lonesome that I ventured to send for you."

"Ventured!" exclaimed Jesse. "I don't like that word. Don't you know I am fully at your service?"

"Are you, really?" asked the girl, smiling.

"Decidedly, I am."

"I can't doubt it; you have proved your good will in the past."

"And it grows."

"Does it?"

"How could it be otherwise?"

"I don't know what there is to increase it," coyly remarked Lillian.

"I do. It is yourself."

"Oh, Mr. Daniels!" murmured the girl, speaking the name Jesse had given her as his own.

"Yourself!" he repeated.

"If that is true I am greatly and sincerely obliged, for the admiration of a truly manly man is something any woman ought to be proud of, surely. Come, Mr. Daniels, all this deserves a bit of reward. I have some choice wine here. Drink with me!"

"I will—to your health and happiness."

"In such a case I will not be backward; I will drink to yours."

All this was interesting to them, and they took the wine in great good humor. Jesse thought he had never seen wine that tasted equal to it, but the beauty of the giver may have imparted something to the taste.

Lillian next set a chair for him, and they sat down and became merry. She soon proposed a game of poker, and it was begun.

Suddenly he threw down his cards.

"What's this?" he demanded, suspiciously.

"To what do you refer?" asked Lillian.

"I feel strangely."

Jesse tried to lift his hands, but they were like lead. The current of his feelings, as well as his blood, seemed to have changed, and he glared at Lillian with renewed suspicion.

"Woman, what have you given me?" he cried, excitedly.

She smiled calmly.

"Wine."

"Shoot me if I don't believe it was drugged!"

"Oh, sir, that is unkind."

The bandit tried to gain his feet, but found he could not do it.

"Come forth!" she added.

There was another sound near the bandit. He tried to move his head to see the cause of it, but he failed. Then a second man came around and stood before him.

"I am a reader of riddles," he calmly announced.

Jesse gazed, and the sight was one which would ordinarily have sent his blood to leaping in his veins. Now, there was only a dull throbbing which told how helpless he was. Then a groan escaped his purple lips.

"Do I need to read the riddle?" inquired the second man.

"Carl Greene!" whispered the bandit.

He had called the right name; the detective stood before him.

Fairy Lillian laughed aloud.

"Surprise parties are always in order," she said, cheerfully; "so we have arranged one for you. How do you like it?"

"Duped!" gasped the bandit.

"It is a bit in that line," she agreed. "You see, Mr. Greene came to me and told me who you were, and asked me to help him snare you. Of course I could not refuse to help the law seek its just ends, so I did my best. I had some drops which were good to take in wine and I gave you some. So you've lost the use of your limbs? Ha, ha! it is not odd after taking my drug."

Jesse glared at Lillian.

"Traitoress!" he hissed.

"At least, I am not an outlaw," she replied. "I do not choose—"

Carl interrupted with a manner as if he really despised Lillian for the part she had played:

"Enough that it is so. Miss Lillian, your drug has worked well."

"Oh, I know its power."

"Where are the ropes?"

"Here."

She brought out the desired article, and Carl proceeded to bind his prey.

"Here is the recess, sir."

Lillian pulled the curtain away from a sort of alcove, and Carl seized his prisoner and dragged him to the spot.

Jesse was stowed away without much ceremony.

Carl went to the window and tapped on the glass.

Immediately after two other men entered, and Jesse, who could see past the curtain, recognized them as followers of Carl Greene in his detective work.

"How goes it, sir?" asked one, quickly.

"I have Jesse James in captivity."

"Bravo!"

"Now we must move for the others without delay. Is the horse dealer still willing?"

"Yes."

"Then bid him go to a bandit with the message."

"Very well. Now to take refuge. Remember and be as still as death, and give this lady a chance to work her drug."

So saying, Carl led the way to the recess, and the minor detectives followed. All took position near Jesse.

"Ah!" suddenly breathed Carl.

It was a knock at the door, and Lillian arose, went to that point and opened the door. Jesse saw Wood Hite outside.

"Is my friend here?" inquired Wood, expressing himself cautiously.

"Just now he has gone for some cigars, but he will return in a moment. Please walk in."

Wood complied.

"While we wait, Mr.— Ah, I believe I do not know your name."

"Penstock," replied Wood.

"Thank you. Now, Mr. Penstock, while we wait for your friend, let me offer you a glass of wine. It is a rare brand, and I do not give it to every one, but I will be frank enough to say I like your appearance."

She smiled on Wood and he smiled in return. Jesse was furious as he saw that his man was proving just as weak as himself. Wood could not resist that smile. Jesse tried in vain to summon his voice—he felt that the band would go to ruin if he did not manage to give the alarm. Futile effort! He could not even whisper.

Lillian poured the wine and Wood put the glass to his mouth, proposed her health and drank.

For the next few minutes he and Lillian said sweet and complimentary things to each other, but the farce soon ended. The drug was at work, and in due time it did its full duty. Little by little Wood succumbed, and sank into weakness and stupidity.

He became as helpless as his leader, and was finally dragged into the recess and stowed away with Jesse.

"Number Two!" cried Carl, exultantly. "At this rate we shall soon have the whole band in the toils. Go out, Robbins, and have our horse-dealer ally decoy in another. Aha! the plot goes nobly. Ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha!" laughed Fairy Lillian.

Again there was the delay, with all behind the curtain but the girl. Then came the knock at the door again. Lillian opened to the applicant and Jesse saw Jack Keene.

"Oh! how do you do?" was the girl's sweet greeting. "Did you meet your friend?"

"No," replied Jack.

"He went for cigars, but will return directly. Pray come in, and then we will be all ready for him."

She placed a chair, and Jack sat down.

She rose and began pouring the wine.

"I am much obliged," replied Jack, "but I must decline. I have a very weak head for drink, and seldom take anything."

"Really it is impolite to refuse a lady," lamented Lillian, sadly.

"And this after I have selected you among all the rest."

"Why have you selected me?"

"To be frank, I like your appearance."

Jack leaned back in his chair and regarded her fixedly.

"What is the game?" he asked.

"The—the what?"

"The game."

"I don't understand."

"Do you want to get me drunk? If so, why?"

"My dear sir—"

"Omit the dearing, miss. It looks to me as if you are playing a trick, but if you are it will not go down. I refuse to drink your compound. If others want to they can, but I don't aspire. What have you done with my friend, your late favorite? I want a showing of hands before I hobnob with the gang. How do I know but you intend to drug me?"

Carl Greene started, and Jesse grew exultant. Here was one man who was not to be fooled by a woman's trick. Noble Jack!

If there was one of the band whom Jesse loved then it was far-seeing Jack Keene.

Lillian was thoroughly rattled. She sat and looked at her visitor speechless in this emergency.

Carl Greene moved restlessly. What would happen next?

The female decoy tried to rally.

"My dear sir," she asserted, "I would not do you harm for all the world. My intentions toward you are of the best, and you hurt my feelings by intimating otherwise."

"Prove it and I will not press the charge, but I not only refuse, as matters now are, to drink the wine, but I call on you to show the man you have so long had tied to your apron strings. If you have done him no harm you are all right, but I suspect you have put him out of the way. Miss, I am going to investigate this thoroughly. Produce my friend, or I will summon all of my party and look into the case fully."

As these words fell from Jack's lips Jesse James felt like shouting with joy, but they produced a different effect on another person.

Carl Greene saw that Jack was not to be duped.

The detective stepped from his covert, revolver in hand.

"Hands up!" he commanded.

Jack turned and saw the old foe of the band.

"Oh, so it's you!" he exclaimed.

"It is I!" agreed Carl. "Surrender, Jack Keene!"

"To you?"

"Yes."

"So you are in with this woman?"

"I am."

"This is all a scheme to capture me?"

"It is, and you are captured. My revolver covers you, and if you seek to resist I will shoot you!"

"A plain statement," coolly answered Jack, "and one deserving a plain reply. You shall have the reply. Here it is."

It seemed sure death to resist when Carl Greene had his hand on the trigger, but Jack was nothing if not reckless. He had no notion of surrendering, and as the last words left his lips he pulled his own revolver with a spiteful jerk.

Carl was surprised, but he rallied to the emergency. Long before he had learned not to give the James Boys any rope, and he did not hesitate as to his duty then. He fired.

Bang!

He was but a moment before the bandit.

Bang!

Jack's weapon spoke, and then the fight was fully on. Each man did his best to be dangerous, and the lead flew furiously.

Bang!

Bang!

Bang!

It was a confused medley, with Jack as the weaker party, but just when matters seemed the darkest for him there was a change in the situation. The door was thrown open and Cole Younger and Jim Cummins rushed into the room.

"Help!" shouted Jack. "Save Jess!"

There was a moment of great surprise as the newcomers perceived the detective; then they threw off their spell and were ready for work.

Again the revolvers rang, and bullets flew everywhere. Carl was worried by the condition of affairs, and when the door was again darkened as Frank James, Clell Miller and Ed McMillan rushed in, he knew just what to do.

One word he spoke to his remaining men, and then they turned and leaped out of the window.

Several bullets followed them, but they did not show signs of having been hit.

"Saved!" exclaimed Jack. "Boys, see to Jesse."

The bandit king was still staggering in his efforts to keep his feet, and Cole seized him by the arm.

"What has gone wrong?" demanded the lieutenant.

"I—have turned fool!" gasped Jesse, bitterly. "Duped by a woman," he added, as if to himself.

Jack turned to look at Lillian, but found she had improved the chance to get out of the room.

The other bandits came crowding forward until all were present.

They did not seem very much surprised to find that their leader was in trouble, but Jack Keene threw a bombshell into the camp as it were.

He realized that it was a time for somebody to take the initiative, and as Jesse was not capable, and he was the only one else who knew how serious the situation was, he came forward promptly.

"Boys," he cried, "who do you think is here?"

"Who?" asked Bill Chadwell, who had come late.

"Carl Greene!"

"What?"

"I say he is here. I reckon it was the sound of shooting that brought you all here. Well, that shooting was a little diversion

between Carl and myself when we tried to blow each other's brains out. We failed—possibly because brains were scarce. But Carl is here."

"Where?"

"Just jumped out of the window."

"Then we shall be attacked."

"We shall."

"We must flee."

"I say fight!" declared one of the rasher men.

"No; he will have all the horsemen with him."

"Away!" commanded Jesse.

"Leave the town?" inquired Frank.

"Yes."

"Then let us go."

"Give me an arm," added Jesse. "The air will revive me. But there is Wood Hite."

"What of him?"

"Drugged and unconscious," explained Jesse, pointing to the recess.

"Can't he be revived?"

"Try fresh water."

The idea was so agreeable to Jesse that he hastened to try the remedy himself, and with good results. In the meanwhile a quantity of the liquid had been poured down Wood, and he gurgled and opened his eyes.

"Boys," urged Jack, "we can't delay in this matter; we must carry Wood away. We must get out of here or——"

"Here they come!" called Hobbs Kerry.

"A force of men."

"They must be after us."

"Look! Carl Greene is at their head."

"We are in for it!" cried Frank James. "We can't get out just now. Out with your weapons and let us fight our battle with spurs on. Try them a hack right here, and then run if we can."

Cole sprang to the door.

"Halt!" he shouted to the advancing force.

Crack!

A rifle passed close to his side.

"Look out!" warned Jim Cummins.

Crack!

Crack!

Cole sprang back out of range and closed the door. The lead was flying too thick for safety, and he was not inclined to parley with them further.

"Make this our fort, boys," he added.

"A mighty poor one it will be," declared Ed McMillan. "Why, a well backed-up bullet would travel through this old shell like a tornado."

"Yet, here we must stand——"

Crash!

A heavy weight was hurled against the door, and it was almost carried from its hinges.

"Give them a volley!" ordered Jesse, who began to feel like a leader once more.

Jack Keene thrust his revolver close to the panel of the door and fired. There was an angry exclamation outside, and it was clear he had not acted in vain. This, however, was a slow way of fighting, and the impetuous bandits flung open the windows and sent out a volley. What they saw while so doing was startling.

"Why, they are closing in on us from all points," cried Cole.

"A perfect army of them."

"We shall be hemmed in."

Jesse thrust all aside who were by one of the windows and himself proceeded to look keenly. He at once became a target.

Crack, crack, crack!

His hat sailed from his head as a bullet struck it just right, but he did not heed the shot.

"This is our hour of action," he asserted. "We can't let them shut us in! Boys, away! We must run while we can."

"But it will be right through their lines."

"So be it; we will cut our way or die in the attempt!"

Crack, crack, crack!

"Jesse, this will not do."

Cole dragged his leader back, but the decision had been made.

"Take the rear window," directed Jesse, "and all go out as fast as possible. Leap, and then run, firing as you need to cut your way."

"Wood!" exclaimed Jim. "How is he?"

"I am all right," asserted Wood.

"Not yet. Hobbs and Bill, do you keep by him and see that no harm comes to him."

"Now!" thundered Jesse. "All follow me!"

He sprang out of the window.

Such a bold step had not been expected by the enemy, and there was a trifle of delay before they now awoke to a realization of the

facts of the case. The bandits tumbled out rapidly, and all were soon on the ground. They started to flee—then the storm broke forth.

"Cut them off!" came in Carl's clear voice.

"Down with the outlaws!"

"Go through them!" cried Jesse.

The rush was made, and the bandits leaped away with long bounds. Jesse led, and there was method in his course. His head had cleared, and he had a definite plan in all he did. The horses were in the direction they were moving, and they were needed by the bandits. Minus animals of their own, it was necessary that they should supply themselves in some way. Jesse had the way clearly in mind.

With foes in their very path the fugitives could not go through without an encounter, and the encounter came speedily. Like so many living battering rams, the bandits hurled themselves on their opponents.

"Make way or die!" was the shout of the leader, and the wild band took it up until the cry was a roar.

Some of the foe obeyed and hastened to get out of the way, but there were enough left so that the fugitives had to fight every inch of the way.

This they well knew how to do, and it was only for a moment that their rush could be resisted.

They broke through, leaving the astounded horsemen standing stupidly in the rear. Then came Carl's voice once more:

"Down in front! Down, so we can fire!"

The horsemen were slow to obey, and Carl grew angry.

"We are going to shoot! Drop, or be hit! Down in front!"

This time he was understood; the horsemen hastened to get out of the way. The space was clear, and Carl and his organized force could see the fleeing bandits.

"Fire!"

Bang, bang, bang!

Bang, bang, bang!

Well was the order complied with, and the bandits heard the whistle which told of imminent peril.

Bang, bang, bang!

Still came the lead, and an occasional vicious ping as it struck some solid object near told how much it would do if it touched bandit flesh.

"The horses!" called out Jesse. "We must get what we need and be off! The horses!"

He was understood. The sheds where the exhibitors kept their animals were near at hand, and into them rushed the fugitives. No time did they have to make elaborate selections, but, using their eyes in the semi-gloom only enough to see that the object secured was a horse, they hustled out what was needed.

By that time the pursuers were again at hand.

"By thunder!" exclaimed Hobbs Kerry, "we are hemmed in."

"Surrounded, sure!" added George Sheppard.

"We shall have a hard job to get through that mass of men," remarked John Younger.

"We can't do it!" asserted Hobbs.

"I say we can and will!" shouted Jesse. "I am not to be scared off! Are you all ready?"

"Yes."

Jesse gave one glance at the dense body of men before the shed and then he sounded the final order:

"Make this the charge of your lives! Cut your way through at all hazards. It is freedom or death; a fight to a finish. Charge!"

The bandits sped from cover and toward the detective's men.

CHAPTER XI.

HUNTED WITH BLOODHOUNDS.

A roar rose from the horsemen as they saw the bandits dash out, and then came the voice of Carl Greene once more.

"Block their way! Don't let them escape!"

The horsemen were eager enough to obey, and they stood like rocks as the riders raced toward them.

"Jesse!" cried Frank, "we must give them a lesson. That body is too firm just now."

"Rifles, men!" quickly ordered the leader.

The weapons were raised.

"Fire!"

Crack!

Crack!

Crack!

It was no vain volley, for the bandits were fully in earnest, and some of the enemy wavered.

Carl, however, was not to be frightened.

"We are ten to one!" he reminded. "Don't let them go through. Let their example teach us how to act. Fire!"

Quick was the response, and shots went back in reply.

The next few moments were like a wild nightmare.

The rival parties fired as fast as possible, and the air was full of bullets.

The town had never seen such a drama.

The gap was soon closed up, and then the crisis came.

Would they succeed in cutting their way through?

Their courage was good, and they remembered that it was not one of Carl's organized commands they had to meet.

That meant much, and they did not falter at their task.

"Hurrah, hurrah, hurrah!"

Cheering wildly and riding like centaurs, they reached the line. Their intrepidity and dashing defiance was telling, and there were some who fell back even before the real danger arrived. Danger to the limit was speedily met.

Like thunderbolts the bandits struck the hostile ranks.

Then came a scene indescribable in its nature. Every man there was on the move, and mingled with the sounds of rifles and revolvers were yells which might well affright even the courageous.

A period of doubt—who would win?

"Hurrah, hurrah, hurrah!"

The cheer broke forth again, and there was good reason for it. The wild riders had passed the line, and now they were hastening away. Carl Greene was to be pardoned that he lost his temper entirely.

"Cowards!" he shouted, "will you let them cow you? Fire, men, fire! Mow them down!"

He was obeyed as well as possible, and the bullets again whistled around the fugitives, but they kept on with defiant yells and began to increase their lead rapidly.

"We win!" exclaimed Frank.

"Are we all here?" asked Jesse.

There was a quick count.

"All safe!"

Unluckily for the fugitives, the nature of the land was against them, and the road soon became so dim that they wandered from it. After that all went wrong. They kept going until they stopped in a trap of nature.

With no means of turning to the right or left, they saw a dark wood ahead of them, and Carl and his men in the rear.

"What are we to do?" asked Frank, nervously.

"Take to the woods!"

Just in time to avoid the pursuers, the bandits pressed on and passed under the trees.

"There can be no hot chase here," said Jesse. "Keep together, if possible."

Those who had looked at the woods with doubt had been right as far as their objections went.

It was a dark, disagreeable place, and though the hardened adventurers cared for this only so far as it made them uncomfortable, they found nothing agreeable in the flight.

Carl made the chase closer than was expected and they had no time to loiter by the way. It was a steady, if not rapid progress, where tall trees and erratic bushes made a roof to the course, and the darkness now and then brought a collision with these impediments.

After a long time they halted, not because they wished to, but because they had run into a sort of trap.

On three sides of them were bogs, pools and streams, impassable to horses, and Carl was in the rear. For the moment they had gained on the pursuers, but they were still to be heard in the rear.

"We can go no further," said Frank.

"We must," replied Cole.

"Our horses would sink in mire in that region ahead of us."

"Well, you hear Carl behind us."

"Carl and death," added Hobbs Kerry.

"Boys," put in Jesse, quickly, "do you see the way clear?"

Nobody answered.

"The night is nearing an end," pursued Jesse.

Still his men said nothing.

"We can't be at Carl's nose when day dawns. It seems to me our one hope is to give up the horses and trust to our legs. Doing this, we can play the game of hide and seek much better than with the horses to crash through the bushes and summon Carl wherever we go."

"You are right, Jesse," replied Jim Cummins.

"We can go softly and secretly if afoot. Who approves of the plan?"

"It seems to be the best way," decided Cole.

"So I think," agreed Frank.

"And you, boys?"

"We think as you do."

"Something must be done immediately," cried Cole. "Listen, the foe is almost upon us!"

"Dismount!" ordered the bandit king. "To your feet and make them serve you well."

Down leaped the men, and all were soon floundering through the swamp. A wild and unpleasant journey it proved to be, for they frequently sunk in the mud and water, and when this combination closed around them it required many a hard pull to get clear of it.

"Hark!" suddenly cried Jack Keene.

"To what?"

"Did you hear that sound?"

"What sound?"

"It was like—listen?"

All obeyed.

They heard a long, slowly drawn, mournful howl, and it struck like a knife to each fugitive.

"Ruin!" gasped Jesse, "it is a bloodhound."

"One? Listen again!"

"Ow, ow, ow!" came the sound.

"There are several of them."

"A pack of hounds in full cry!"

Rarely did the bandits get rattled, but such was the case now. It was against their taste to be hunted in that tangled-up region by both men and beasts, and they knew the cunning skill and relentless nature of the bloodhound tribe.

"I did not think of this!" spoke Jesse, seriously.

"There's dozens of them if there's one!" added Jim.

"Away!" cried the bandit king. "Let no time be lost. Run, and let it be for life!"

Just then a fresh tumult of cries came from the bloodhounds, and the leader of the robbers did not need to urge his men. They broke into a run and went tearing wildly through the swamp.

Sharply pressed the dogs, however, and the systematic manner of the fugitives was lost. Somewhat further they went, and then Jesse spoke to the man nearest him. It proved to be Ed McMillan.

The bandit king looked back sharply, and then suddenly stopped entirely.

"Are you mad?" cried Ed.

"We will have it out here."

"How?"

"That dog must be settled."

"Shall we fight him?"

"Stand where you are, Ed, and leave him to me."

They had just passed a little glade. There the darkness was not so intense. The light of the stars struggled through and gave enough light to the place to make objects plainly distinguishable. Jesse knelt at the edge of the bushes and awaited the rush of the hound.

Ed understood the plan and stood still. He saw that, to avoid betraying sound, the leader had drawn his knife to fight it out. Ed brought out a like weapon, and they waited again.

Crash, crash!

"He comes?" whispered Ed.

From the other side of the bushes shot a long, lithe form. It was the hound, running like a slender streak of lightning, it seemed to them; and the light was strong enough to reveal his red mouth and gleaming teeth. A dangerous, a terrible foe!

Pat, pat, pat!

His feet fell lightly on the ground, and he flashed across the glade. He neared the kneeling bandit; he raised his head; he seemed to know the minute of action was at hand; he leaped into the circle where bushes met the glade.

Little less brightly than the dog's eyes glittered those of Jesse James, and he made the momentous move. Holding his knife firmly he drove the blade straight toward the breast of the tawny brute.

A thud! A muffled howl! A groan! The dog fell; he struggled feebly; Jesse leaped to his feet.

"Done!" he cried, triumphantly.

"On!" exclaimed Ed. "Do you not hear the others close at hand? Haste, Jesse! Quick, or we are dead men!"

Jesse James required no urging. He heard the sounds, and it was easy to tell that several dogs were coming in a party. To stay and fight, them would be worse than foolish, and he acted on Ed McMillan's advice.

"Come!" he replied.

He turned; Ed followed; the fight was resumed.

"Ow, ow, ow!" sounded the wailing cries of the hounds in the rear.

"Jesse, this is terrible!" declared Ed.

"Yes."

"Ow, ow, ow!"

A fresh outbreak from the dogs, nearer and sharper than before, startled the bandits and they hastened on. It would never do to pause when danger was so close.

A few rods they ran and then a sheet of water appeared before them.

"Jesse, we haven't time to go around——"

"Plunge in!"

"See, a man is fishing out yonder!"

"A negro!"

"One man in the world who does not seek our blood!"

"Ed, we must swim to his raft and see what he can do for us."

"Suppose he should turn against us?"

"Don't you remember we have money in plenty in our pockets?"

"I see. Swim to him."

The resolution was soon carried out. The fisherman stared in surprise when he saw them, but his manner remained mild and unconcerned.

The almost exhausted bandits reached the raft.

"Uncle, help us." requested Jesse, feebly.

"Why, shore, chillun."

It was an unconcerned answer, and the negro did as requested. Aided by him to gain the support, they sunk down and lay panting.

"Golly, you uns is about dead," said the fisherman, wonderingly.

"Uncle, who are you?"

"Me! Oh, I's ole Zeb Comfort."

"Do you live near here?"

"Yes."

"Have you a heart?"

"Why, shore, boss."

"Have you heard the dogs?"

"Yes, sah. Did they chase you uns?"

"Yes, and there are men with them who seek to kill us. Look here!"

Jesse pulled out a handful of money. Wide opened the eyes of the fisherman.

"Golly!" he gasped.

"Do you want all that?" added the bandit king.

"Do I want—do-do-do I want dat money fer mine, you say ter—— Say, golly, you done got ter jokin' de ole man, sah?"

"Here is ten thousand dollars. All is yours if you will save us from the men who follow the dogs. But how can you do it? How? How? Speak out!—for heaven's sake, speak out!" frantically cried Jesse.

In this crisis the negro would have been excusable for getting rattled, but he did nothing of the sort. He remained as cool as man could be, but pleasantly expectant.

"Sah, I'll win dat million ef dis heap of ole bones hold inside my fesh, sah. Down into the water!"

"How?"

"Down under the raft."

"But we can't hold on, we are so weak——"

"Listen, quick! I's done got a big fishin' net hung onter dis raft, an' it's so big an' so strong it will sure hold both of you. Jest you drap down an' get inter it. Den you see dis raft is made ob biyant logs, jest like cork. You'll find dat many ob dem set up out o' the water, so when you get down you can poke your heads up an' get all de air atween de logs dat you need an' never be seen by yer enemies, even if dey is on de raft."

"But it seems impossible——"

"Down, or you are goners."

"Obey, Jesse!"

Ed hurriedly cast himself into the water, and Jesse followed his example. Old Zeb did not keep them in suspense, but showed them where the net was, and much to their surprise, they found that it was all he had claimed.

He got them into the net: it held them up well; they found that while some of the logs of the raft were under water, others set so far above it that they could raise their heads, breathe freely, and not be visible from the top.

In brief—singular situation—they were suspended in the bag, and with every prospect of keeping life in their bodies.

"Hallo-o-o!"

It was a long-drawn shout from the shore, but Old Zeb was making every pretense of being engaged in fishing again, and he heeded not the cry.

"Hallo!" called the man on shore.

"It is Carl Greene!" whispered Ed McMillan.

Old Zeb waved his hand again.

"Have you seen any men around here?" demanded Carl.

"Only we uns, you an' me," explained Zeb.

"But didn't men cross the lake?"

"No, sah."

"I believe you lie."

"No, sah, de fishin' ain't ob de best," answered Zeb, ignoring the uncomplimentary retort.

Ed had a good position to see out, and he suddenly cried:

"Jesse, there is a boat there, and they are getting into it."

"They are coming here."

Stout rowing soon brought the boat to the raft. Jesse, peering from his covert, watched the foe, and could see no inquisitive glances leveled at the raft.

"Friend," said Carl, as they pulled up, "do you make much money at fishing?"

"Wal, I ain't got no bonds ner cowpons yet, boss," Zeb answered.

"Poor, are you?"

"Poor as Lazarus, boss."

"Do you see this bank-note?"

"Ef it ain't an opterkel delusion, I reckon I do."

"Do you want it?"

"Thank ye, sah. I will take it——"

"Wait a bit. You must earn it, first."

"Boss, you kin have all my fish——"

"That is not it. This is a ten-dollar bill. It will be yours if you tell me the truth. Two men came down to the shore yonder just ahead of us. They must have swam to some point near here, and it seems to me you must have seen them. Tell me all about them and this bill is yours."

"Yes, sah."

"Have you been here ever since daylight?"

"Yes, sah."

"It has been light for half an hour."

"Yes, sah."

"And you have seen nobody?"

"Jest so, sah. I have had my eyes pretty wal open fer dat thar Simon Sunday—he's a low-down nigger—he likes ter come here an' fish an' I don't like ter have him. So I has kept my eyes open as wide as a barn door, but never a thing has I seen. No, sah; thar ain't no man been nigh here."

Carl Greene struck his hand angrily on his knee.

"The man I want to find is Jesse James, the outlaw," he said, "and I would give a cool thousand dollars to get him in my clutches. Where can he have escaped to? Am I baffled? No, no; I will have him if it takes a lifetime!"

Jesse James, hiding behind the log, smiled grimly.

"Lucky for me," he thought, "that this bloodhound does not suspect. But I am still in great peril."

CHAPTER XII.

THE BANDITS STRIKE AGAIN.

Old Zeb was the most philosophical man present.

"I hope you'll done have good luck wif findin' of Jesse James, mister," he replied. "I'se often thought that ef I was a rich man I should be in mortal fear o' my life, an' this has made me lay awake more than once an' worry about it."

Carl Greene was not in a mood to appreciate the humor of this reply.

"Then you have seen nobody?" he added.

"No," answered Zeb.

"The men must have sunk into the earth."

"They are doubtless hiding near the shore," suggested one of the detective's men.

"Nonsense! If so the dogs would smell them out in short order."

"I forgot that."

"Well," continued Carl, sharply, "we seem to be losing time here, and we may as well move on. Considering the lay of the land, I think it best that we take to the east shore and go north by that course."

"Pull on!"

The detective gave the order curtly, and it was duly obeyed. Oars were dipped, and the boat moved away from the raft.

Jesse breathed a sigh of relief. Situated as he was, it was great good luck to escape Carl for even a time, and he felt exhilarated.

"You uns keep right quiet," cautioned Zeb, in a low tone; and for some time the bandits continued to remain secreted, while Zeb watched his line as if his whole soul was centered on fish.

When the boat and its occupants had disappeared wholly, the fisherman added quietly:

"Did you say you had dat rest o' the money wif you, boss?"

"It is all ready for you," answered Jesse.

"Mebbe you had better give it ter me. You might drop it overboard, an' dese fish are dat hungry, they would as soon eat it as not."

"I'll come out——"

"No you won't."

"But I've got to be on the move."

"You give me dat money, an' then I'll show you all about dat."

Circumstances were not favorable for the exchange of cash, but Zeb had been so faithful that Jesse hastened to do as requested.

Then Zeb began to haul away at the anchor, a thing the bandits had not observed before, and the raft began to drift.

"We'll soon get ashore dis way," he remarked.

"A mighty slow way."

"So it is, but it's better than to go in the boat wif de detective fellows, ain't it?"

"As usual, you are right. Slow as it is, we approve of it. Let her drift, uncle."

The raft was moving toward the very point where the bandits thought they wanted to land, and its progress really was not so very slow.

A decided current took them along, and they neared the northern shore in due time.

All this while the two men rested in the fishing nets, wet but safe.

When they finally floated in under the bushes the negro bade them come up, which they did.

Zeb told them all he could about the country, and there his usefulness ended.

They thanked him for his kindness and then passed on, leaving him a very rich but calm darky.

All was quiet in the woods, and there was nothing to tell of human beings or bloodhounds in their course.

Acting on Zeb's advice, they held to a certain course, and traveled five miles without adventure.

"Jesse," said Ed finally, "this quiet is surprising."

"Yes."

"Can all have gone on beyond us?"

"So it seems."

"Do you suppose the boys have succumbed to Carl's attack?"

"We shall have to look to the future to decide."

"We must be near the railroad track of which the darky told us!"

"Yes."

"Then we shall be able to——"

Click, click!

It was a sound in the bushes just ahead of them and a sound not new to them. They stopped short—they knew what it meant.

"A rifle in the bushes!" hissed Jesse. "Look out!"

"Shoot to kill!" was the order from the bushes.

"Stop, stop!" cried another voice, "it is Jesse and Ed."

"Good, good!"

The two adventurers stood amazed at the prospect of such good luck, but Cole Younger hastened out from cover. His face was beaming, and he held out his hand.

"Boys, we are very glad to see you!" he exclaimed. "We thought you were dead or lost to us."

Other members of the band joined them.

"Have we really found you!" returned Jesse.

"We are here, as you see."

"All of you?"

"Every man, now you and Ed are with us!"

"All living?"

"Yes."

"But Carl?"

"Has chased us like the bloodhounds which followed his lead. We have escaped them all, and some of the dogs have scented their last game. We had to do a little killing to lessen the number of the four-footed fiends."

Jesse looked around and saw that his command was, indeed, all present, and his blood began to flow naturally once more.

"This is amazing!" he cried.

"We are not yet safe, Jesse!"

"Why not?"

"Carl and his men are roaming the woods to find us!"

"What are the chances?"

"Come this way a step."

Jesse obeyed, and, on passing the line of the bushes, saw the railroad track.

"Would that we had a train at our command," he exclaimed.

"Just what we mean to have!"

"How?"

"A train is due here in a few minutes!"

"Well?"

"We have laid our plans to try and flag it! We are going to operate the trick of supposed danger, and see if they will halt!"

"Good! It will be a big gain if we can do it. What is the train?"

"Local passenger."

"Is it rich?" asked Ed McMillan.

"Come, come!" cried Jesse, "what do we care for that now? I am so dead tired that all I want is to escape Carl Greene. Be peaceful if we get the train, boys. No ugliness toward the passengers or crew. But what is your excuse if the train halts at your command?"

"Obstruction on the track!"

"Is it really there?"

"Yes; we pulled a big rock down right on the rails."
 "They had better halt," added Jim Cummins. "If they do not the rock will send them all to glory in short order."
 "Big enough to wreck the train, eh?"
 "Yes."
 "Then we will have the train whole or in pieces."
 "Of course," explained Cole, "only a few of us will exhibit ourselves to the trainmen if they pull up, for ten men could roll the rock away. The rest of us will hide and when the chance offers get quietly on board."
 Toot, toot! came the sound from the east.
 "The train!" cried Frank James. "To cover, men!"
 All except those chosen for open work obeyed, while the rest stood in plain sight. Around a bend came the train, the locomotive sending out clouds of black smoke.
 "She is humming," said Jesse.
 "Very speedy for a local."
 "Ha, the boys begin to swing their coats! Will they be heeded?"
 "If they don't the train will be in splinters in a short time."
 "And the fool of an engineer will be in another land."
 Not one of the bandits felt any sting of conscience at thus putting human life in jeopardy, and it was with feelings purely of a business character that they watched the train hum along toward them.
 Frantically the decoys swung their garments.
 "The engineer sees them!" exclaimed Clell Miller.
 "Yes."
 "He stares hard, as if uncertain whether to obey or not."
 "Now he acts; he is slowing up; he will stop."
 This was correct, and the train slackened speed and came to a full pause not far from those who had hailed it.
 "What's wrong?" demanded the engineer.
 The bandits had their story ready; they told of the rock on the rails; they convinced the railroad men, and a delegation went to the place around the curve. Of course several passengers alighted, and the remaining bandits improved the chance to mix with them, preparatory to taking quiet passage in the train.
 The bandits who had done the hailing, the crew and the few passengers who had joined them grappled with the rock, and the track was speedily cleared.
 Then the party came back, with the conductor giving profuse thanks to the men who had saved the train.
 The cars were reached, the engineer had his foot on the step of his locomotive, the conductor was watching for the proper moment to give the signal to start, and the passengers were about to pile on when a clear, loud voice broke forth above the words of all other speakers, sounding these words:
 "You are in a trap!"
 The conductor started and looked for the speaker. He saw a mud-covered man emerge from the bushes with others as badly off at his heels, and then came the addition:
 "The James Boys are here!"
 It was an announcement which had deep meaning in Missouri at that day, and the conductor grew nervous.
 "Who are you?" he demanded of the mud-covered man.
 "I am Carl Greene, the detective."
 "Thunder! I know you now."
 "Then you will believe me?"
 "Yes, but do you say——"
 "The James Boys are here."
 "Where?"
 "Mixed in with your party. I tell you it was a trap which made you halt. You are in the jaws of the outlaws."
 Carl Greene was talking right to the point, but the bandits were not idling in the emergency. Jesse and Frank were in the cars, but Cole had command outside. As soon as he caught the drift of the unlucky revelation he knew what to do.
 "We must take the train," he cried. "Dick Little, to the cab! You, Ed McMillan, will help him. Get control there, and do it immediately! Do it well! Shoot the engineer if need be! Away!"
 The chosen two disappeared from where they stood.
 "Men," added Cole, "prepare to seize all here! As soon as Dick and Ed have——"
 Crack!
 Crack!
 "They fight for the locomotive!" cried Cole.
 Crack! crack!
 "I think we may need to reinforce them——"
 Toot, toot!
 "Ha! there goes Dick's signal; they have the engine. Quick, get aboard, all, and we will be off. Carl and the conductor move this way, and there is no time to lose."
 Prompt to obey, the bandits swung themselves to the cars, and then the train began to move. Carl was quick to take alarm, and he and the conductor shouted lustily as they ran forward. It was

their plan to board the train, of course, but they found an obstacle in the way. The bandits lined the steps, and a line of revolvers met the disciples of law. Jesse was again in command.

"Back!" he shouted, "or you meet destruction!"

"Down with Jesse James!" was Carl's answering cry.

Jesse flashed a keen glance to the right and left and saw the exact situation. Most of the trainmen, as well as the detectives, were on the ground, and it was clear that they ought to be left behind.

"Give them a volley!" ordered the bandit king.

Bang!

Bang!

Bang!

Sharply the weapons cracked, and some of the crew found it too hot around there for them, but Carl rushed forward without a grain of fear.

"Down with you, Jesse James!" he exclaimed.

The train began to get under headway.

"Give them one more discharge, just for luck!" called Jesse with a laugh. "Show your teeth! Fire!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SLAYERS OF THE ROCKS.

The bandits were quick to obey, and a warm volley met the foes of the band. It was enough to discourage all but the more zealous, but of the total number several ran forward and tried to catch at the platform rails of the moving train.

This they were prevented from doing, and the train rapidly receded, leaving them to a vain chase. The bandits laughed jeeringly, and sent a few more shots after the persons who were vanquished, then the train went rattling down the track.

Carl, the conductor, and the engineer were left behind, the latter being wounded.

"Jesse," said Cole Younger, "the people in the cars are all stirred up; just like bees, in fact."

"We will soon prove to them that we are harmless and well meaning," replied Jesse, still laughing. "Boys, raid the whole train and show them what we are. Do not shoot anybody unless they are ugly, but let the fact be early impressed on their minds that we are going to be masters here. Don't let that escape their notice."

The bandits were not slow to obey. They had seen so much of trouble lately that they were in an ugly mood, and their propensity to act the bully was stronger for their condition.

They invaded the cars, and the lesson they wished to convey was duly made plain. Freely stating their identity, they bulldozed all as they marched tumultuously along the aisles.

There was no resistance; the passengers did not dream of making a stand in their present flurried state of mind, and the robbers were absolute rulers. When the latter fact was established, they had chance to talk with each other, and it was a most hilarious gathering.

For a long period of time they had waged warfare with Carl Greene. Fights and stratagems were numerous, and victory swayed pendulum-like between them.

The detective had hunted them mercilessly. Now and then he lost sight of them and they had a little rest, but he was sure to reappear. He gave telling blows, and it was only that they often got the better of him that they were enabled to bear up under the dog's life which was theirs.

They had come out of the swamp wet, mud-covered, weary and discouraged, but they had been able to wrest the train from under Carl's very eyes, and now they were exultant.

Thus they were a merry party as they rolled along toward the west.

After awhile Jesse called Frank, Cole and Jim to his side.

"What is our plan?" he asked.

"Have you formed one?" inquired Cole.

"Not yet."

"This is a good time for it."

"Do you want to stick to the rail?" asked Frank.

"We can't safely do so long," declared Jim. "We have stolen the train in a very pretty way, but the country ahead of us is such that we can't hold to it long."

"Another thing," reminded Cole. "We have been told that this is a local. It probably does not go far, and when its right of way ends there may be danger that we shall run into some other train, if we keep on."

"Well thought of," replied Jesse. "We do not want to get smashed up, and a plan must be laid whereby it may be avoided."

"The only way is to leave the train," said Frank.

"Where shall we go?"

"If we could only secure horses!"

"Unfortunately we do not know the country ahead of us."

It seemed to be an unfortunate predicament, and the bandits were long in arriving at a decision, but they were decidedly uneasy over the prospect of running ahead in the daytime with a stolen train.

Finally, a plan was decided upon. It was to wait until a lone-some spot was reached, and there cut off all the cars but one. Thus, the regular passengers would be left behind, and the bandits could be governed in a measure by the developments of the day.

There was no limit to the greed of the band for money, and, when this decision was announced there was a clamor for the valuables of the passengers. Jesse did not object, and the men roamed through the train and collected all the cash and watches.

There was much indignation over the robbery, but the passengers were too wise to resist.

A wood being reached the train was cut in two as planned, and the robbers went on with the locomotive and the single car, while the rest of the cars were left in the lonely place selected.

The bandits, however, did not intend to keep on much longer. All were of the opinion that such a course would end in their own discomfiture, and, perhaps, death, so they watched for the next wild place and came to a halt five miles from where the cars had been stopped. Rocky, tree-covered hills were on both sides of them.

They deserted the engine and plunged into the bushes.

"Do we keep together?" asked Cole.

"What is the voice of the band?" returned Jesse.

"It is hard for sixteen men to pass secretly through a given country," suggested Jim.

"But two might."

"Yes."

"It is suggested that we divide into parties of two," continued Jesse. "Who favors the notion?"

"I do."

"The reply seems unanimous. Is there objection?"

Nobody answered.

"So be it, then. We will adopt our old device. Now what plan can we lay for reunion a little later on?"

Some consideration of this subject was necessary, but it was soon settled.

As well as possible they decided on the point, and then they divided into twos and plunged into the woods, each pair taking a course to suit themselves, but one calculated to make them diverge.

Jesse and Frank went together, and climbed the hill until they were on an elevated point. There they paused and shaped their course anew.

Toward the north was wild, promising land, where the region was undoubtedly the abode of farmers, and among these people they usually had found the greatest show of kindness in the past.

Easily they pursued the allotted course.

Game was abundant, and they satisfied their hunger at both noon and night.

Taking care not to get weary, they kept to their course until night fell. They were then in a wild, rocky, mountain place, where there was no sign of human occupancy except for themselves.

"Here let us rest!" said Frank.

"Do you like the roof over our heads?"

"We have slept under the sky more than once."

"True. Better a plain roof of air than the eyes of Carl Greene to watch over us!"

"I see no town."

"We might possibly, were it day."

They were not quite certain, but as they stood there they realized that sleep was the thing most essential to them, and all inclination to travel to a human habitation vanished.

They went a trifle further, however, to find a suitable place to sleep, and then came to a sort of mimic temple of Nature. Rocks reared their heads high in the air, and in form often pillar-like, so it was not unlike a ruined city, though all was the result of chance.

Here they lay down and fell asleep.

Three hours passed peacefully, and then Frank awoke. He started to his elbow confused. He saw singular sights, and for the moment he could not remember where he was.

Light glared in his eyes, and the forms of men were in the mimic city. The place thought so desolate was desolate no longer.

Jesse touched his companion's arm.

"Be quiet!" he whispered.

"What is this?"

"I only know I have been woke by these sounds and sights. Listen and watch."

The cause of the light and the forms of the strange men had been but dimly known and seen before, but all became clearer. Stronger grew the light, and the men came within a few feet of the bandits—so near, in fact, that Jesse and Frank would have crept back had not the pillars of rock prevented it.

They were hemmed in where they were, and all they could do was to nestle back in the deepest recess and keep still.

Close to them the strangers paused.

Looking keenly, the watchers saw they were two in number and fellows of muscular figure and bold bearing. But little more could be discerned, for they wore masks, which hid their faces.

They gazed around attentively and then one of the pair spoke.

"This is a good place."

"As good as any," agreed his companion.

"Here let it be, then."

Both men carried torches, and the last speaker now waved his brand around his head in short circles.

It was a signal, as was soon seen. Three other men appeared, two being masked like their predecessors. The third, however, was of very different sort. His hands were tied behind his back and his arms held by his companions, and, moreover, his face was free from mask.

Yet further, that face was stained with blood, and his rumpled clothing gave token of a struggle in which he had got the worst of it.

"A prisoner!" whispered Frank.

"Yes, and I don't envy him his chances."

"A rather fine looking person."

"Yes."

"Looks won't do him much good now, I reckon."

All of the new party came to a halt.

The prisoner was made the centre of the group and his four companions stood grimly by his side. If he was alarmed he gave no sign of it, for his bearing was upright and steady.

"Well," cried the unknown leader, after a pause, "how do you like your situation?"

"Better than my company," retorted the prisoner.

"So do we. Yes, we like the situation. It interests us and we are going to make it interesting for you. Do you know how?"

"I know nothing of your business, Rush Giddings."

"Do you wish to?"

"I don't care!"

"Sulky, are you?"

"I have nothing to say to you!"

"It would avail you nothing."

The captive coolly shrugged his shoulders.

"Perhaps!"

"Do you doubt me?"

"I gave no opinion."

"Confound your non-committal way! I will dally with you no longer!" cried Giddings, impatiently. "It's not the fashion of this region to be slow of speech; I will not set a new example. John Benton, this is the night on which you die!"

Even at this the prisoner did not blanch.

"You seem well informed."

"I am. We are going to kill you."

"Why?"

"Because you are meddling with what is none of your business."

"I suspected where the shoe pinched. The broom is never raised for a clearing out unless a good deal of dirt is raised; well, whatever I have done, I take back none of it."

They drew their revolvers.

"These will settle you, Mister Man!" added Giddings, exultantly.

"Here you will lie, and when your bones are found, if they ever are, it will be impossible to tell whether you are John Benton or Jack Smith. We deny you even a grave."

"The hyena does the same with his victim," coolly replied the captive.

"Enough! I will not listen to your impudence further. Boys, get ready! Revolvers up! Aim! Fire!"

CHAPTER XIV.

A MAN OF MYSTERY.

The last word from the would-be assassin's lips came in a dull key, for there was a check to his speech. The hands of the men were up, but they did not press the triggers. Something interrupted them.

Crack!

Crack!

Two of the hands went down helpless, and then strangers leaped out from among the pillars and confronted the assassins. They found themselves covered with revolvers.

"Hands up!" commanded Jesse James.

The bandits, much as they desired to keep out of sight, had not been able to resist the impulse to go to the aid of the man who could face death as coolly as did John Benton. They had moved

Accordingly, and it was a good deal of a shock to the first party when the grim robbers thus faced them.

"Put up your hands or die!" added Frank James, sharply.

"What in thunder is this?" demanded Giddings, startled.

"It will be death for you if you disobey."

"Who are you?"

"That has nothing to do with it."

"Do you dare interrupt here?"

"Do they?" cried one of the wounded men. "Why, you fool, can't you see my arm drip blood? Well, I should say they dare to interrupt."

Giddings blossomed out into a hero.

"Shoot them!" he ordered, drawing his own revolver.

Crack!

Jesse fired, and Giddings' revolver fell to the earth.

"Perdition!" he howled.

"You would be winged, so you can't complain of what you have."

"Men, at them——"

"Only one of your party remains unhurt. If he wants a brush with us he can have his fill of——"

"No, no! I don't!" declared the man.

"Then down with your weapons! Down with them!"

Promptly the revolver was cast down, but Giddings, furious with rage, picked it up with his left hand.

"I will kill you!" he shouted. "I will——"

Jesse took one step; his clenched hand shot out, and Giddings fell, neatly knocked down.

All attention was on him for the moment, and when it was withdrawn it was found that the other three men had improved the chance and run with speed and skill. The clattering of rocks told of their flight.

"Shall we pursue?" cried Frank.

"Yes, yes!" cried Benton. "Go!"

"Not any!" asserted Jesse. "I don't chase men over rocks like this when there is no need, and let them shoot me."

"You are right," cried Benton. "Well, friend, there is one thing you can do, if you will. I am still tied up——"

"Wait a second."

The bandit whipped out a knife and cut the bonds.

"Thank you, friend, thank you!" exclaimed Benton, seizing the hand of his rescuer. "I know how to appreciate a good turn, and I know of none more to be appreciated than the saving of one's life. If I ever get a chance I will repay you by giving you a lift."

"Oh! that is all right," answered Jesse.

"It would have been all wrong if you had not come into the game just as you did. I am not proof against bullets, and those knaves intended to kill me."

"I reckon they did."

"Sure!"

"Why was it?"

"Do you live in this section?"

"No."

"Then I will say that the people about here are a good deal ripped up the back by local troubles. In brief, there is a red-hot quarrel over a tract of land so large that it pretty near takes in all of the county. Every man, woman or child who has even a square rod of land is interested, and the feeling runs high. Each accuses the other of trying to rob him or her, and bad blood has followed."

"I reckon you are a claimant."

"No, but I am just as bad in the eyes of some of them. Amiable Rush Giddings would have killed me as a part of the rivalry."

"He may do it yet, if we don't get out of this locality," reminded Frank James.

"You are right. Your revolvers barked the limbs of these forest trees—meaning these countrymen—but they are not dead, and it would be their way to sneak up and take a shot at us. Let us change our base."

"Which way do you go?"

"West."

"Can we accompany you?"

"I shall be very glad to have you."

"Then it shall be so."

Frank was not sure that he was pleased with this new step, but he made no remonstrance. They began the journey, and moved on down the rough side of the hill. The bottom was reached in due time. Benton had been a pleasant but not loquacious companion, and they were more and more inclined to think well of him. Nothing was seen of Giddings and his gang.

On the level Benton paused.

"Now, let me know in what way I can help you," he directed.

"Help us?"

"Yes."

"I am not sure that we need special help, but——"

"I am going from here to a certain house. I shall, however, tarry there but briefly. When I have seen the inmates I shall go

elsewhere on business. If you wish I can see that you have shelter there as my friends, but you must remember that this neighborhood is divided into two factions by the county land feud and you may be mixed up in it."

"Is there a railroad near?"

"No."

"I suppose we can buy horses in the morning!"

"Doubtful. Torn up as the people are by the trouble, they will be unlikely to sell."

It occurred to Jesse that he and Frank knew how to get horses without buying, and his reply was shaped on this thought.

"With your permission we will go to the house with you."

"Come!"

Benton led the way, and a walk of a mile took them to the house. Benton quickly aroused a man within, and they were admitted. He introduced the bandits as his friends, and then held a secret conversation with the master of the house, whose name was Whipple. Then Benton came again to the James Boys. Looking at them keenly, he said:

"I am off now. Here you will be safe unless some of the opposition force comes. A certain Walton Parkmore is leader of the party opposed to me, and he has a local detective named Harry Brown as his chief aid. Giddings is another of the gang. These men are the deadly foes of all my party, including Whipple, and if they come you will have to defend yourselves. Whipple will be loyal to you."

"That is all we need."

Benton stood in silence, regarding Jesse closely.

"Is your home far from here?" he inquired.

"In Arkansas," replied the bandit.

Another period of silence; then Benton added:

"I hope you will not fare badly in Missouri. Anyhow, this night will not be forgotten by me, and you can rely upon me to help you at all times. Here is my hand on it."

Completing his preparations the speaker went out, and then Whipple conducted his guests to a chamber to finish the night. Left alone, Frank turned upon his comrade with the abrupt monosyllable:

"Well?"

"What?"

"Are you satisfied with our situation?"

"Why not?"

"We have blindly followed Benton, and here we are. Suppose he has gone to summon men to seize us?"

"I have confidence in him."

"So you had in Fairy Lillian——"

"Stop!" cried Jesse, bitterly. "Do not mention that folly. I shall never see her again—drop her. But Benton is not a weak, capricious woman; he is a man, strong, alert, decided. I trust him."

"I hope we shall not wake up dead."

With this sharp retort, Frank began to cast off his clothes, and despite the doubts and uncertainties of their position, the bandits were soon in bed and asleep. Morning found them alive and unmolested, and when they dressed and went down, they found a good breakfast prepared. Whipple was there, but Benton had not returned.

Just as they finished the meal and were rising, Whipple, who had been sitting by the window, suddenly exclaimed:

"Here are two stray horses!"

"Possibly a chance for us!" whispered Frank to Jesse.

They stepped to the door, and then came a surprise. The horses were their own; the faithful Siroc and Jim Malone, who had carried them on so many wild rides. The bandits were speechless with amazement.

"Two right good animals," added Whipple.

"That they are," agreed Jesse.

"They have strayed away from some party who have got into a fight in this present sectional trouble."

"I know the party."

"Who is it?"

"Those horses belong to my companion and myself."

"To you?"

There was an air of suspicion in Whipple's manner, but Jesse at once raised his voice and called:

"Siroc, Siroc! Come here, sir!"

The black horse quickly raised his head, and when his name had been repeated he raced to Jesse's side. Then he tried with all the language of his nature to show how well he was pleased. He rubbed his head against his master and whinnied his feelings. At the same time Frank and Jim Malone were having a like scene.

"That settles it beyond question," declared Whipple. "You have witnesses stronger in conviction than men, for horses cannot lie. Gentlemen, you are lucky to have such animals, and I congratulate

you on recovering them. They shall be put in my stable and given the best of care in all ways."

"We will pay you well."

"Never mind that; I have orders from Benton to do all possible kindness to you."

"Who is this Benton?" abruptly asked Jesse.

"One of my party in the land fight."

"Yes, but what is he?"

"I am sorry, but I can tell you no more; he is acting a quiet part, and is every inch an honorable man.—More than that I am not at liberty to tell. Few here know him as he is."

The bandits had to drop the subject, but, after the horses were stabled, the two talked of it by themselves.

It was nearing night when Whipple came in from the stable and announced in an uneasy way:

"There is somebody outside who has a message for you. Gentlemen, I may as well say there is trouble afoot."

CHAPTER XV.

HUNTED MEN.

The bandits were at once on the alert.

"What is it?" inquired Jesse.

"Here comes the man."

A fourth person entered, and they saw a farmer, if his appearance was not deceptive. He was young, and looked every inch the fighting man, though his manner was mild now.

"I come from Benton," he abruptly exclaimed.

"What of him?" asked Jesse.

"He has sent a warning to you, and this is the purport of his message: You are known!"

"Known!"

"As the James Boys."

Jesse set his teeth tightly for a moment. This was news with a vengeance.

"By whom?" he asked coolly.

"The faction in the land fight which is opposed to us—the gang led by Wal Parkmore and Rush Giddings. They have in some mysterious way discovered who you are, and it is their scheme to come here at just midnight and capture you."

"I do not admit that we are the James Boys, but why should these men leave their regular fight to make war on us?"

"Harry Brown, the local detective, is a very alert man. He is mixed up in all that is going on here. If he knew of you, he would drop all else to seize such royal game. He does not know it, perhaps, but Walton Parkmore does. It is he who will try to seize you, and he dares not delay for fear Brown will get ahead of him. Probably Rush Giddings is in the game against you with Parkmore. If he is, you can guess in part how it came to be known you were the James Boys. You know what happened last night—Giddings is just the man to follow such a thing up."

"If he don't look out it will follow to his death," cried Jesse, warmly.

"I am glad your courage is good."

"Don't fear as to that. We would enjoy a brush with these knaves."

"Let it be avoided, if possible. Benton has suggested that you outwit your foes by leaving here previous to the hour set for the capture. As I said, that will be at midnight. Now will you meet me at ten by the crossroads to the west?"

"A good plan," added Whipple.

"Who is this Benton, anyhow?" demanded Frank.

"That I am not permitted to tell now."

"Are you sure it is not all a trap you are laying?"

"Stop Frank!" commanded Jesse. "That is unworthy of you."

"You can depend on us to the death," declared the messenger.

"We will meet you," replied Jesse.

"So be it. My name is Cone Dakin, and I have a house a few miles away. I will take you there, and you can remain until Benton comes."

Night fell at last, but the desire of the bandits to see Benton was not satisfied. Wherever he was he did not appear there, and they and Whipple had things all to themselves. As it was a considerable time to ten o'clock a game of poker was proposed, and it was soon under way. The bandits had enough money about them to make the stakes almost anything, but they did not reveal the fact, and they contrived to let their companion win all he could desire.

Jesse had just secured a hand of four aces when Frank suddenly raised his head.

"What's that?" he asked.

"What?"

"I thought I heard an unusual stir in the stable."

"I heard nothing."

"Listen!"

"Say, that was a groan!" cried Jesse.

He threw down his cards, and accompanied by his companions, hastened toward the stable. This building adjoined the house, and it was not necessary to go out of doors, nor would the light which Whipple seized be visible outside.

Jesse had pressed on ahead of the others, and as he advanced without the aid of light he suddenly stumbled over something and almost fell. A groan at his feet followed.

"What the dickens!" he cried.

Just then the other two men arrived, and the lamp told a part of the story. On the floor lay a man, who writhed and groaned but did not rise.

"Well, what have we struck here?" Jesse demanded.

"It don't seem to be a lively strike."

"Why don't he get up? What's the matter with the fellow?"

"Hanged if he don't seem to be dying."

"Then how does it come about?"

Three puzzled faces were above the stranger, but Jesse finally brightened.

"I'll bet a dollar it's a horse thief!" he cried, with a motion toward Siroc and Jim Malone.

"That's it," agreed Frank. "See how restless the animals are. They would not be that way without cause."

"This knave tried to take them, and one of the pair resented it and kicked him senseless."

Whipple bent over the stranger.

"You are right," he announced. "This chap has a crushed head, and you can rest assured he got the hurt by trying to be too familiar with the horses."

"Ha, ha!" laughed Jesse; "it isn't their way to tolerate a thief."

"They like to make their mark on such a person, as in this case."

"This looks ominous to me," added Whipple.

"Why?"

"I believe he is more than an ordinary horse-thief. May he not be one of our enemies?"

"If that is so, the attack is coming before twelve o'clock," declared Frank.

Whipple ran to the connecting door, and then as quickly retreated.

"They are there!" he whispered.

"Who?"

"Your foes."

"How do you know they are ours?"

"I heard one of them say that Harry Brown had probably got ahead of them. He is the local detective, you know. These fellows must be followers of Wal Parkmore."

"Wal or no Wal we'll give them a lesson!" exclaimed Jesse. "Here, Frank, go with me and we will punish them to their fill. Come!"

Whipple spoke a word of caution, but it was unheeded. The James Boys rushed into the kitchen. Six men were there, but their numbers made no difference to the bandits. They leaped at them like panthers and a hot hand to hand struggle was inaugurated. Jesse and Frank did not try to use revolvers, but their knives were out and the impetuous onslaught was too much for the enemy. Two of them fell and the rest rushed upstairs, yelling for help.

"There are more up there!" cried Frank.

"Yes, and they will raise the mischief with us if we stay here!"

"The attack has been made ahead of the appointed hour. We must flee while we can. Away! Get out the horses and dash off!"

The wisdom of his plan was so apparent that they hastened back to the stable. Once there all was quickly done. In a few moments the bandits, already in the saddle, sped out of the building and began to retreat. It was not to be an easy one. From the bushes which grew close to the house men started up to stop them, but the James Boys at once rode at them in headlong fashion.

For a moment they stood firm, but it was unlucky for them. With steady hands the bandits fired a volley and room was made. It had been a convincing argument.

But other foes were in the way.

From the house came a loud command, the exact purport of which was not plain, but it was evidently the voice of a leader, and the ambushers acted accordingly.

Several leaped to the attack at once.

Nothing could have pleased the bandits more. They had been annoyed, and the insolence of the gang in thinking they could trap the wild riders of Missouri was more than Jesse and Frank were inclined to accept calmly. A lesson would do the fellows good, and the chance was at hand to give it.

The evident plan of the foe to take them alive gave opportunity for in-fighting, and the bandits wielded their revolvers as clubs with telling effect.

They were cutting their way, and the impetus of their horses took them steadily forward. Some one saw the danger to the plot and cried out sharply:

"Shoot them!"

The order was followed by a volley of shots.

"Lead for lead!" exclaimed Jesse.

Both riders fired at close quarters.

Now the affray was fully on there was no abatement of the deluge. Each revolver had six shots, and not until they were empty did the James Boys cease the fusillade. When it was over the way was clear; the last of the foe had gone down or taken to his heels.

Jesse laughed scornfully.

"Do these men claim Missouri blood?" he cried, derisively.

"The house gang are getting a move on," replied Frank.

"I see. Yes, it's to be an organized chase, but do you think they can give any points to Siroc and Jim Malone?"

He caressed the neck of his gallant horse as he spoke.

"Now to meet Cone Dakin," he continued.

It was not hard to find the way, but that it was not to be a quiet ride was soon proven. Behind them came the thud of horses' feet. The enemy had got under way much more quickly than was to be expected.

The disposition to take matters easily was soon put aside, for the pursuit became hot. The foe were not meanly mounted by any means, and they came sweeping along at a warm pace. Still, the James Boys had no fear as to the result, and the first of the race was tame enough as far as danger went, if not in regard to speed.

Suddenly another horseman came into sight with a rush, and they instinctively raised their revolvers.

"Danger!" he exclaimed. "Some of them have made a short cut through the woods, and they bid fair to intercept you at Muggins' Ford. If they do, it will be an ambush."

It was Cone Dakin who spoke, the darkness having prevented them from recognizing him at first.

"Ride at full speed!" he added. "You don't want to meet the ambushers."

Dakin was very much wrapped up in the result.

"If they get to the ford first it will be bloodshed," he declared.

"Your successful work at the house has temporarily put them out of love with the plan of taking you alive, and it's orders to shoot to kill."

Jesse laughed.

"Two can play at that game."

"They do not seek to play it fairly."

"Come as they will they will find us with them."

"The crisis is near at hand," added Dakin, in a low voice. "Is it to be victory or death for us? Look, you can discern the ford now."

CHAPTER XVI.

A SUSPICIOUS STRANGER.

Muggins' Ford was to be seen but little in the dim light. No more than the low hanging bushes struck the gaze of the James Boys as they obeyed the direction to look, but they saw the vast possibilities of an ambush being laid there.

"Truly, it was an ugly place for such a thing."

"Perhaps we had better go around," suggested Cone, after a pause.

"No; keep on," Jesse coolly returned. "We won't give them opportunity to exult over us."

"What are the chances of their being there?" Frank asked, thoughtfully.

"It's about an even thing."

"Make the dash!"

Jesse spoke firmly and the die was cast. For weal or woe the risk was to be taken.

They went flying down the slope.

The horses seemed to scent the battle, and they moved their limbs in the rapidest flight, their heads outstretched and their eyes gleaming.

Revolvers in hand, the riders scanned every visible point.

Was the way clear, or did death lurk in the bushes?

Siroc had gone to the front, and his shapely feet splashed the water of the ford. Then the doubt was settled. There was a flash in the bushes, the sound of several shots, and the lead flew as if in rain. The enemy were there, and the clothing of the riders was cut by the rain thus defied.

The ambushers had met no easy prey, nor were the horsemen aware of the struggle thus forced upon them. Revolver answered revolver, and bullet after bullet went whistling into the bushes.

Human targets were not at first to be seen, but the flash of hostile weapons was enough for such experienced marksmen.

But more was coming.

The James Boys did not fail, and the ambushers leaped out to settle the battle hand to hand. Reins were seized, and revolvers placed almost at riders' breasts.

Then, indeed it was time for decisive action. One moment of delay would be fatal—the weapons must be checked before they could be discharged. For at that distance no one could miss his aim.

Equal to the demands of the occasion were the horsemen, and before it could hardly be realized the trio were out of the path and making way through the shallow water.

"Spur on!" called out Cone Dakin. "We are all right if we but improve our chances. Ride hard!"

"If they want more let them come and take it," calmly replied Jesse. "I don't aspire to figure in any riot, but we are not in these parts to be butchered. Let them come on if they wish."

The foe did not come on. Two or three wild shots followed the victors, but there was not the slightest sign of pursuit.

As they reached the farther shore of the creek Jesse looked back and laughed.

"For fighting men they appear very quiet."

"The triumph is complete."

"If you want it to continue so, let us go on," added Cone. "They will hardly follow us to where we are going, but while in this section we are game they will hunt eagerly. Let us lose no time."

"Good! We want to go with you and see what we can do for you in the matter nearest your heart."

Cone did not answer, but soon returned to other subjects as they rode on.

The rest of the way to Dakin's home was unmarked by any incident of importance. His dwelling place proved to be an humble house like that of his class, but one of uncomfortable appearance. The horses were duly stabled, and then all entered the house.

Cone made a light. The James Boys looked with more than ordinary curiosity at the man who had thus become their ally.

Cone was young and strong—a typical son of the soil in many respects—but possessed of more visible intelligence than is given to most men reared where schoolhouses are as few as they were in that region. He had a strong, honest-looking face, but it was marked by lines which told of dogged will born of trouble.

Briefly, he was like one who had been driven to thoughts and deeds by trouble, which he would not ordinarily have sanctioned.

He returned the bandits' regard until all smiled in unison.

"We are strangely met, gentlemen," remarked Cone.

"Rather."

"I little thought ever to have the James Boys under my roof."

"Especially as honored guests," added Frank.

"There is something in that. But I have found that the worst of men are not those branded as outlaws. If there be a fiend in human form it is one who cherishes only guile under a mask of honor like Walton Parkmore."

"Tell us all about this matter. Remember, chance has made us allies, and we are bound to repay you for your friendly acts."

"You cannot keep out of the battle unless you leave this section, Mr. James, if you would. You will be hunted like wild beasts until one party is a winner and the other a bad loser."

"It is a battle of bullets."

"Exactly."

"Let it come. This nest of vermin needs clearing out, and with the union between us it may be done."

Cone reached over and clasped the hand of each of his companions, one after the other.

"I thank you," he replied, in an unsteady voice. "I am in hard luck, and I realize what it is to have the help of those who have courage, muscle and cunning."

"Well, tell us your story."

"It is but little I can add to what you know already, but this is the story:

"A short time ago I expected to be happily married to the girl Wal Parkmore has spirited away. She was richer than I, but not to such an extent that any one could accuse me of mercenary motives—rich people don't grow hereabouts like berries."

"Suddenly she disappeared. Parkmore made a hue and a cry, and had her searched for, but nothing came of it. Now he did not for a moment deceive me. I had suspected him for some time, and warned Olivia against him, but she had not taken the interest in my views which they were proved to deserve."

"Parkmore, being next heir to certain property after her, has decoyed her away somewhere—I know not where."

The James Boys did not feel any great interest in this matter. Men and women had their grudges and plots all over the world, and were daily engaged in carrying them out, and this was especially so on the frontier. The bandits could not afford to get up too much of a fever over this case, but their companion had

been friendly to them, and they gave him due sympathy, outwardly, and agreed to help him if they could.

"Now," said Frank, presently, "what do you know of this plot against us?"

"Oh, it is simply because you are the James Boys."

"Yes; but what do they intend to do?"

"Capture you."

"Do you know more?"

"What I know I have learned by listening on the sly to the enemy. Parkmore and Giddings are your foes. Brown, the local detective, learned of you and planned to strike you. The other men tried to get ahead of him and get the reward."

"Much good may the try do them!" retorted Jesse.

"Parkmore and Giddings are both resolute men."

"We have seen Mr. Giddings."

"A dangerous man."

"Let him seek to prove it, and he may find his grave ahead of date."

Cone Dakin smiled at the grim remark. He was delighted to have such notable allies enlisted in his behalf, and his spirits were rising.

Another day was near at hand, and as it might be one of trouble the trio were not inclined to waste more sleep. They retired, and the remaining hours of darkness passed quietly.

Before the James Boys were up Cone was out on a scout, and when all met at the table he gave the news that he had been able to find no signs of foes hovering near.

This did not indicate more than temporary relief, but it gave them opportunity to eat in peace, and they improved it. When this was done, Cone remarked:

"I am going to saddle and ride out to see if there are any signs. I would like to have you remain here, if you will, for in that case I shall know where to find you if I desire to do it in a hurry."

No one objected, and the plan was carried out.

After being left alone Jesse took a book and sat down to read, but Frank walked out of doors, looked the premises over, and then went to the edge of the woods. He was standing there when the crackling of dry twigs caused him to turn suddenly. He saw a man who was a stranger to him, and yet, to all appearances, one of the residents of the region. His plain manner of dress indicated it.

This man regarded Frank closely, and then asked:

"If I may trouble you, sir, which is the most direct way to Muggins' Ford?"

"Yonder."

Frank answered briefly, not being sure of the question, since it did not harmonize with his theory that the man was a resident. Evidently, however, he had not told enough, for the man lingered. His gaze remained sharply on Frank's face.

"How far is it to that place?" he added.

"A couple miles."

"Is it good walking?"

"Excellent," grimly answered the bandit, heedless of the fact that he was giving false information.

"How near there does Amos Baldwin live?"

"Oh, something like five minutes' walk," replied Frank, who had never before heard of Mr. Baldwin.

"Is Charles Murphy still living with him?"

"I think Charles has gone to St. Louis," returned Frank, thoughtfully; "but he may have returned lately."

"Thank you—much obliged," said the stranger.

"Don't mention it—you are quite welcome—very welcome, sir."

The questioner moved on, leaving Frank gazing after him.

"Well, if he knows all he has asked about, my information will do him no harm, but if, as may possibly be the case, he is a genuine stranger, he may find me an unreliable guide. But, then, what better could I do when I never had heard of Amos and Charles?"

Not long did Frank see the humorous side of the incident. The mistrust he had felt of the man at the beginning grew upon him, and he finally turned abruptly, went to the house and made his report to Jesse.

"Aha! A spy, eh?" exclaimed the latter.

"So I think."

"You should have winged him."

"I was not sure of my position. He may have been all right."

"You watched him closely, did you?"

"Yes."

"And were led to doubt him?"

"Yes."

"Then it is a safe bet that he is a spy."

"Our enemies are on our track once more."

"Confound it; why need these countrymen turn aside from their own feud to hunt us? What have we ever done to harm them?"

"We are the James Boys."

"Yes; and we are paying the penalty of crime. When a man turns aside from the path of honor he opens the door to all sorts

of misery. If I had known it when I did my first lawless deed—but it is too late for change; too late for repentance."

Silence fell between the bandits, and no more was said until Cone Dakin came riding up to the house. They went to the door and stood watching as he dismounted. He was quickly made aware of the suspicious stranger's coming and going. He heard, thoughtfully.

"What do you think of it?" asked Frank.

"I really do not know, but one thing impresses me as suspicious, which you have not mentioned. Men, strangers to this region, traveling on foot, are about as rare as white blackbirds."

"Then your theory agrees with ours."

"It would not surprise me if that fellow was a spy."

"Then we will get out of here."

"Get out?"

"Yes; I do not see any reason why we should hang around here and let them hunt us down at their leisure. I will be frank enough to say that I have become much interested in your mysterious Mr. Benton, and I have desired to see this man again, but it may be too costly. Our way is to fight when there is peril, not sit down supinely, and this I prefer to do now. Mr. Dakin, we are much obliged for your hospitality, but we will not accept it further; we will take our horses and go."

Cone meditated.

"Why," added Jesse, "should we meddle with your local quarrel, if we are not called upon to fight for you? True, I want to see Benton again—but let that go."

"Yes," replied Frank; "let it rest. We must be off."

"Well, gentlemen, you will have to have your own way. I dislike to part with you, but if you say so, so be it."

"I think it best; we will go."

"Wait a bit."

From the rear came this speech—a peremptory command—and as it was in a voice new to the conversation, the trio turned quickly.

A startling scene was revealed to them.

A score of men were there visible, and almost every one had in his hands a leveled rifle. The muzzles of the weapons were turned on the bandits, and they were thus fully covered. If there was hostility in that show, they would be mad to resist or defy the guns.

"Wait," added the last speaker, "until you hear from me!"

"Lost!" exclaimed Frank, excitedly. "It is Carl Greene!"

CHAPTER XVII.

AN AMAZING INCIDENT.

The untimely appearance of the detective was a great shock to the James Boys, and for once they were taken thoroughly unawares. They could only stand and gaze at the row of yawning rifles.

Carl Greene smiled quietly.

"Yes," he replied, "you are lost this time."

"What fiend sent you here?"

"I came not from, but to the fiends."

"Cheap talk!" muttered Cone.

"Perhaps you are right. Let me change my manner."

He did change it, suddenly and completely.

Sharply he exclaimed:

"Jesse and Frank James, we have you covered. Dare to make a move and you are dead men. We will not dally with you—it is surrender or die! Hands up!"

Despite this warning, Jesse began to move his hand covertly toward his revolver.

"Stop!" cried Carl. "I warn you that we will shoot to kill. Keep your weapons where they are. Surrender!"

"Gentlemen," said Cone, gravely, "you seem to be in for it!"

"Carl Greene," spoke Jesse, "I will settle this as man to man, by fighting you."

"You will not; you will yield. Down with your weapons!"

Sullenly the bandits stood in silence.

"Advance on them, men," added the detective. "Barton and Robins, do you take their arms. If they resist we will drop them."

The selected two started to obey the order, and the bandits knew they had reached the end of their rope. With all those rifles bearing on them at such short range, it would be nothing less than suicide to try and fight it out. Carl's command could fells them easily and leave no life in them.

"Take their weapons," Carl repeated.

Jesse folded his arms over his chest.

"Carl," he admitted, "this is your hour of triumph. I have no more to say."

"It is the hour of the triumph of law, justice and honor," replied the detective, impressively. "No man can claim glory when outraged law has the first call."

There was no reply, and the bandits submitted to be disarmed and bound. Not a finger did they resist, but the glare of their eyes told that they were never less subdued. Had they possessed one chance in a dozen they would have battled against all odds.

Being rendered helpless, they were led into the house.

"This is a most desirable end," observed Carl. "I have longed for this hour a long while. When I first arrived here I consulted the local detective, Harry Brown. He set out to forestall me, and so did some of the citizens on their own hook, but it is I who have achieved the success. Inside of three hours I will have my prisoners on the way to St. Louis."

The James Boys heard all this, but said nothing. Among Carl's men Frank distinguished the suspicious stranger who had lately accosted him, and he knew then the exact kind of a spy the man had been. He had taken word to Carl, and this was the result.

Cone Dakin was informed that he was not to be arrested for harboring the bandits, but he was told that he must not aid them further, and, to render his efforts in that line futile, he was given the choice between being locked in a room by himself or leaving the premises. He chose the last alternative and rode away.

The detective and his men seemed to be waiting for a detachment of their command, and they settled down with that object in view.

Jesse and Frank were put in a room by themselves. It had two doors, but no window, as it was little more than a closet. In each of these rooms to which the doors led, Carl's men were situated, so that they could not have escaped if they had been free from bonds.

"Well, we have got it hard at last," remarked Frank.

"A cold deal," agreed Jesse.

"We can't escape alone."

"No."

"And the band are not likely to come to our aid."

"No."

"Prison stares us in the face."

"How about the gallows?" inquired Jesse.

"Ugh! Don't mention it."

"The glory of the James Boys has gone out."

"No more train and bank robbing."

"True; but one thing we can do; we will show them we are pluck to the last."

"That we will."

"Let come what will, we will look them in the eyes without a waver."

"Yes—yes; let them see how the James Boys can die."

"With a cheer on their lips."

"And a jeering laugh for their foe."

"So it shall be. In the worst time of all we will sneer at them."

With comments like these the redoubtable prisoners passed their time, but when an hour had worn on they heard unusual sounds outside.

"Hark!" said Jesse; "there is a new arrival."

"Probably the reinforcements for which Carl is waiting."

"No doubt."

"Then he will soon have us on the road to St. Louis."

"Yes."

The sounds of the new arrival were soon transferred from the yard to the house, and then, after a short pause, the guards in one of the rooms were taken out by Carl. The object of this was soon seen. He entered that same room accompanied by a second person.

"This is the best room we can give you, sir," said Carl.

"It is quite good enough, Mr. Greene," was the answer.

Jesse started.

"Frank," he whispered, "what voice is that?"

"It seemed familiar."

"To me it seemed like—— But I think I can see."

Jesse was near the connecting door, which was slightly ajar, and he rolled over and gained the view he desired. What he saw was a new shock. The detective's companion was Benton.

"Has he, too, turned against us?" wondered the bandit, bitterly.

Carl was seating a chair for Benton with the air of one dealing with a superior.

"It is but poor accommodation this house can afford, sir."

"Don't mention it. I am all well enough," answered Benton.

"Yet it seems odd for the Governor of Missouri to be thus situated."

"Should I not be willing to put up with what a trusty detective like you can endure, Mr. Greene?"

"But, governor, the humble house——"

"Come, come, my good sir, remember only that I am a man like yourself, and forget that I am the Governor of Missouri."

Jesse was almost breathless. Rarely had he received a shock like that. The detective called his companion "governor," and as this

astounding fact was learned Jesse's memory went back to sundry pictures he had seen of the man then occupying the chair as chief ruler of Missouri, and he could not doubt that it was all as it seemed.

Benton was, indeed, the dignitary named.

Carl, as has been said, acted like one in the presence of a superior, but there was not one grain of the fawner in gallant Carl's nature. Due respect he paid the great man, but there was no servility.

"Well, sir," he added, "how do you like roughing it?"

"If I ever tell my story in full," replied Benton, smiling, "it will be found that I have seen more of roughing it than is to my taste. Yet I do not complain. I came down here unknown to all to learn the truth about this country quarrel."

"Have you succeeded?"

"I have. The result of all my investigations is that I have put Rush Giddings and Walton Parkmore under arrest this morning, and they will be taken to St. Louis and tried for their crimes. More, I have been able to rescue the young woman, Olivia Arnold, and shall duly restore her to her lover, young Cone Dakin. All is now settled, and Parkmore's gang are beaten."

"Possibly you have heard that I have captured the notorious outlaws, Jesse and Frank James?"

"I have; and a noble piece of work it is."

Jesse ground his teeth in fury.

"And we saved this man's life," he thought. "Governor he may be, but I would kill him if I could."

"It is the end of a long chase," pursued Carl.

"And happily ended. All this is due to your great skill and valor. Nobly have you done."

"Thank you, governor. Will you see the prisoners?"

"Directly, Mr. Greene. First of all I wish to perform my ablutions. Will you kindly send a man here with a basin of water? This done, leave me alone for half an hour. Then I will come to you."

"I will see to it immediately, governor."

The detective went out, and soon a subordinate came with the water. The door was closed on the governor, and he was left to perform his ablutions. Jesse mechanically watched in silence.

The governor had seemed careless and weary, but when he was alone his manner changed so suddenly as to almost startle the bandit. He stood more erect, and a keen, decisive expression came to his intelligent face. He looked around hurriedly; then with quick, light steps he moved toward the door where lay the watching bandit.

He entered the room.

He stopped and bent his gaze on the captives.

His lips moved as if with strong emotion, and his full colored face grew pale. Deeply he seemed to be moved.

The James Boys could find no words with which to address him.

Suddenly he drew a knife from his pocket.

"He will kill us," thought Jesse.

The governor bent, knife in hand. The weapon touched Jesse's person. It was drawn toward the holder; the bonds of the bandit fell away; he was free.

Benton gave his hand.

"Rise," he whispered, "but be still if you value your life."

Like one in a dream Jesse accepted the help. Then the holder of the knife turned to Frank and freed him also. He motioned toward the room which had been devoted to his private use; then he turned upon the bandits again with his pale face yet paler.

He pointed toward the window.

"Go!" he whispered.

"What?" gasped Jesse.

"Go!"

"Where?"

"To liberty."

"I—I don't understand."

"You are free."

"Free?"

Jesse uttered the word blankly. The speech of the governor was plain enough, but the bandit could not believe that it was meant as it seemed to be.

"If you desire freedom," pursued the man who had masqueraded under the assumed name of Benton, "all you have to do is to take it. I give you liberty—it is the reward of what you did for me when Rush Giddings would have shot me."

"You—you set us free?"

"Yes."

"And you are the Governor of Missouri?"

"Yes."

"Well, I may be awake; but I can't believe it."

The governor grasped Jesse's arm.

"Listen!" he directed. "You saved my life, and I am not ungrateful. I am proving it now; I will prove it by setting you free."

Of course you will forever keep the secret; it would be my ruin if Carl Greene or any one else know what I do."

The bandit impulsively seized his companion's hand.

"Governor, you are a trump——"

The hand was quickly withdrawn from Jesse's clasp.

"Do not misunderstand me. This is done simply to pay the debt I owe you, not because I sympathize with you—I give you no sympathy. I have had a hard struggle to decide to adopt this step, for you are a malefactor. I would rather lose my right hand than aid an outlaw as I do now, but I will pay the debt of gratitude; you shall go free. May Heaven and my own conscience forgive me for it."

The James Boys were silent. They understood why the governor was so pale; they understood why he trembled so strangely. It was a severe shock to him that he must aid the notorious bandits, but he would not overlook their services to him.

"Go before Carl Greene comes in," added the officer, after a pause. "I shall have to lie to him, and swear that you have not passed by me. It will long be a wonder how you escaped, but so let it be. My position will save me from suspicion. Go now—go, and if you have one grain of manhood left in your nature, go and reform. Do not misunderstand me, sirs! I do not put the seal of my approval on your careers in this State; I condemn all you have done. Your lives are revolting; your crimes are many and vile; ignominy links her hand with yours wherever you go."

The once brazen bandits flushed deeply.

"More," pursued the governor; "do not think you will have my sympathy or help in the future. By this act I repay all I owe you, and from this hour you have no more bitter foe than myself. I shall increase the reward for your capture; I shall spur on the detectives to arrest you anew. If you are taken you will get no aid from me. The debt is paid. Go!"

The speaker pointed toward the woods, and then turned his back on the bandits.

Jesse stammered singularly as he tried to answer, but Frank plucked at his sleeve.

"Come," he whispered.

They went to the window. They leaped out.

The governor was alone.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE BANDITS' AUDACIOUS PLOT.

The James Boys did not by any means consider their safety assured, for as they touched the ground they expected to see Carl Greene or some of his men near; but nothing of the sort was to be seen. There was a clear road to the adjacent bushes, and they made use of it with the celerity of men whose lives had been like theirs.

A few long strides and they were under cover.

"Which way?" asked Frank.

"I know not," Jesse replied. "This is a somewhat beaten way where all would expect us to go, and we must seek some other route——"

"Look!"

"What?"

"Our horses!"

"Thunder! That's good!"

"They are tied to the tree. This is not chance!"

"Our rescuer had them put there, knowing we would take just this course. He did it on purpose."

"Yes—and see yonder!"

"Ha, it is Cone Dakin, rapidly retreating."

"He has been the governor's agent; he has put the horses here."

"Then why does he make off so fast?"

"He has done his work. He has seen us discover the animals, and now, like the governor, he wants no more to do with such cattle as we are."

"I believe you are right. Have we come to this?"

"Let us not think of it. This has been much of a shock to me, but it is not the first. Forget it all, and let us think only of our safety. We have the horses; let us away!"

"Yes; we can't depend on one friend in this section, and the sooner we get off the better."

By this time they were in the saddle, and the start was duly made. They had no great knowledge of the vicinity, but they believed they could care for themselves. Weapons had been hung on the saddles, so they were amply equipped for severe work, if such became necessary.

They set their faces in what they deemed the proper direction, and hurried along, keeping in the cover of the woods as much as possible.

Little was said about their encounter with the State official. As indifferent as they assumed to be the matter irritated and worried them, for he had spoken plain words even while doing them a great favor, and it revealed themselves as they were.

The subject was not pleasant.

Luck remained with them, and by means of hard riding and immunity from encounters with others, they were soon well away from the vicinity.

The flight was continued as constantly as possible and not exhaust their horses, and the night of the next day fell before they decided to consider themselves safe.

Then they camped in a grove on a hill and prepared for a peaceful night. Food they had left from a purchase made at noon, so they wanted for nothing.

After eating they lay down and smoked contentedly.

"Frank," said Jesse, anon, "where do you suppose the boys are?"

"Impossible to say."

"I should like to meet them."

"For any especial reason?"

To tell the truth, I am getting in a mood for adventure. There is a certain recklessness about me now, as if I could take any risk for the sake of a little excitement."

"That is easily had."

"Let the chance come, and I will show the people of Missouri that the James Boys still live. We are—what are you looking at?"

"I thought I saw a gleam of light through the trees."

"It may be so, for we have not looked off in that direction. There may be a house over yonder."

"Look for yourself. Is not that a light?"

"Yes."

"It's stationary, too."

"We will have a look at it."

"I am with you."

They rose and made their way through the trees a few rods.

"Hello!" cried Frank; "it is a town!"

"Quite a good sized one."

"It will furnish a chance to get a warm breakfast, perhaps."

"Will it not do more? What is the matter with our going there to make a visit?"

"Not to rob them, Jesse?"

"Possibly not; I do not say so. Just to make a visit is my idea."

"We will do it if you wish."

"Saddle up, then, and let's go over. It will do no harm to have the horses along, for we sometimes have to evacuate towns in some haste, aha!"

The laugh was echoed, and the plan duly carried out. On arriving, they stabled the animals at a hotel, and then found out the name of the place. This was not all that interested them. They had noticed the rustics of the town standing around with an expectant air, or wending their way toward a certain large building, and Jesse sought for light on the subject.

"Oh," replied the landlord, "there is to be a play here this evening."

"A play, eh?"

"Yes. It is called 'New York's Midnight Lights and Shadows.'"

"Quite a stunning title."

"Presented by a company right from the Royal Blue Theater of New York."

The James Boys had never heard of such a theater, and they doubted if anybody else ever had. They knew well that cheap companies were in the habit of making barn-storming tours of the country towns, and trying to win glory and dollars by all kinds of devices. This did not specially interest them, but Jesse looked at Frank.

"Let's go," he suggested.

"To see the play?"

"Yes."

This play was like all the rest. There was a poor girl, a lover, who was equally poor but painfully well-meaning and heroic; a villain who was rich, and various other persons who had done time on the stage for many years under various names.

This particular audience was not captious, and they were entranced from the beginning. They admired and they applauded until their red hands grew tender and of the hue of a lobster.

Only the James Boys were dissatisfied.

"It's the same old New York gag," grumbled Jesse.

"The players are wretched."

"Let's go on the stage and have some fun with the actors."

"I fear they will not appreciate it."

"Our revolvers will make them see the point."

"Oh, I see. Frank, I am with you! Aha! Great plan! We will do it!"

The notion of breaking up the play was just in the line of the reckless bandits, and they became all eagerness to carry out the

scheme. They consulted, considered the means and the probabilities, and, as it was clear they would receive no good will from the barn-stormers, decided not to waste any time in trying to get inside quietly.

They marched to the stage door and opened it coolly. A member of the company was on guard there.

"No admittance!" he sourly exclaimed.

"No?" replied Frank, innocently.

"No."

"But we have tickets!"

"Not for this door."

"Yes, they are. Read them and see!"

With this exclamation Jesse thrust a revolver under the nose of the surprised guard.

"This says to admit the bearer," added the bandit, "and if you don't do it we shall shoot the roof off your head. See?"

The guard was no coward, and he tried to defend his position, but he was run back and disarmed before he could do any harm. When he was bound and stowed away in a recess the intruders were ready for further work. They were in their most reckless mood and ripe for mischief.

"Come on!" ordered Jesse, and they marched to the interior of the building.

Then they took a look at the stage. The heroine and the villain were having a scene, and the villain was urging the persecuted girl to accept a hundred dollars from him to save her father from dire distress, his only demand in return being that she should marry him—that is the way with stage villains.

Frank had an idea. The hero had been a man no longer young, and he had a make-up to cause him to look less than his years. Frank hurriedly donned the wig and made a daub of paint over his face. Then he was ready.

Frank James, posing as the hero, addressed the heroine:

"Did I hear this gentleman offer you hard cash if you would marry him?"

The actress knew this was not in the play, but she was so much amazed that she mechanically answered:

"Yes."

"Then I advise you to do it."

The bewildered audience stared at this now original hero, utterly at a loss to account for his change of base.

Frank James was ready to laugh aloud, but he kept serious outwardly and continued:

"Never throw a good thing over your shoulder. This gentleman talks with money, and you can't afford to notice that he squints in one eye and wears false teeth. Take him. He never will bite you!"

Then Frank turned and took the hand of the villain.

"Old boy," he added, "let me be the first to congratulate you. I hope you will live long and be happy. I have courted this daisy for some years, and I know she is all right, barring a temper which might spoil the disposition of an angel, and a few such things. Of course you know she is an escaped convict, but she served her time like a man. Take her, and I will not indulge in any more cheap talk against you. You may be a villain, but this girl is so ugly she will tame you down."

Dead silence followed. The audience was astounded, and the heroine and the villain were speechless. The change in the play upset all but the audacious James Boys. They were there for fun; they were having it.

They knew trouble was ahead; they were ready for that, too.

CHAPTER XIX.

CARL GREENE'S ROUGH EXPERIENCE.

Dazed as the genuine actor and actress had been by the abrupt departure from the regular lines of the play they had been slow to realize that the disguised bandit was other than their real companion, but as it dawned on them that he was a base impostor, they grew angry as well as astonished.

"What does this mean?" demanded the villain.

"Hush! Keep it dark!" whispered Frank James.

"What do you mean?"

"If you don't open your mouth you won't catch cold," replied Frank, coolly.

"I will go to the manager——"

"Try it, and I'll shoot you. Let the play go on. If I don't follow the usual lines I'll agree to make just as much fun. Let the play go on, old man."

The actor was not of a timid character, and he made a move not expected by the bandit. He turned to the audience and loudly cried:

"Ladies and gentlemen, I am the victim of some base plot, and I know not what harm has been done to my fellow actors. This man is an intruder, and he threatens to shoot me if——"

"Yes; and I'll do it, too."

Frank jerked out his revolver and pointed it at the actor's head.

"Apologize or die!" he shouted.

He had the advantage of this man, but the audience was made up of men who knew something of fighting themselves. They rose in a body, and some of the nearest leaped to the stage with an agility which startled the bandit. They, too, produced revolvers.

"Nobody can break up a play in this town!" cried one of them. "You brawling tough, get off the stage or you will get off the earth!"

Frank found himself covered, and the weapons had an ugly look.

"Put him under arrest!" was the additional cry.

Jesse James rushed out from the wings and took a place by his comrade.

"Do you get back where you belong!" he exclaimed to the audience, "or there will be several funerals here to-morrow."

"Shoot the ruffians!" cried somebody.

Click, click!

The James Boys realized that the hammers of the rival revolvers were being drawn back, and they took the alarm at once. They dropped to the floor.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Bullets whistled over them freely, but without effect.

"We are with a fighting crowd," exclaimed Jesse, hurriedly. "Get away while we can."

"Shoot again!" was the order.

Bang!

Jesse put a bullet through the side of the man who had been so prominent, inflicting a disabling wound.

"Away!" he cried, to Frank.

The bandits turned to carry out the plan, but the people blocked their way. Several men flung themselves on the comrades at once, and Jesse and Frank were so hemmed in by the weight of numbers that they could not make a regular run of it. Plainly, the only way was to fight desperately, and this they prepared to do.

Jesse flourished his revolver.

"Make way!" he shouted. "Let us pass, or we will shoot the whole lot of you. Make way!"

"Seize them before they can shoot!"

Somebody shouted the order, and the crowd surged upon the bandits. Frank's arm was caught so he could not use his revolver, and when Jesse fired his arm was knocked up. Then the crowd piled heavily on them.

"Hurrah for the James Boys!"

Jesse and Frank grew suddenly alert. That voice—that cry! To them neither was unknown. They looked quickly, and then a solid mass of men surged toward them from the outskirts of the hostile crowd.

"Cole Younger and the band!" cried Frank, jubilantly.

Cheer answered cheer, and the rescuers beat their way impetuously through the citizens' lines. They reached the side of their leaders, and then the whole matter was speedily settled. It was no longer two against many, but sixteen strong raiders side by side, and their rush scattered the citizens like chaff.

The bandits had the stage all to themselves.

"By thunder!" exclaimed Jesse; "I don't know any reason why we can't act out this play as we wish now."

"We want to get away," replied Cole, quickly.

"Why?"

"Some of Carl Greene's men are in town."

"Do you counsel flight?"

"We have another plan."

"What?"

"They simply know we are somewhere within a radius of thirty miles of here, or have been. Well, not being under watch, why can't we show our teeth?"

"How?"

"By nabbing Carl as he comes into town."

"Ha, ha! A royal scheme!" cried Jesse.

"But there is more."

"What?"

"We have positive information—we got it by listening on the sly to the conversation of the men of Carl's party now here—that Carl carries a key to the bank here."

"Impossible! Why should he have it?"

"Listen. Abram Soden, of St. Louis, is a heavy stockholder here. Somehow he got news of things, and he gave Carl the duplicate key, saying to him: 'Go there, watch the bank unknown to the citizens, and defend the money belonging to me and the rest. Here is the means by which you can enter the bank secretly at any time.'"

"And Carl has the key?"

"Yes."

"Sounds very improbable."

"We believe it true."

"Why discuss it so long?" demanded Frank. "If we nab Carl, shall we not learn if it is so?"

"True!" cried Jesse. "We waste words here. Come on, boys. Let other things be as they may, we will seize and humble Carl Greene. To the horses, and away!"

The plan was carried out, and as none of the citizens were encountered, the bandits were soon riding along the stage road. They went on until a suitable place was reached, and there ensconced themselves in the bushes. Only a short time had elapsed when the rumble of wheels was followed by the appearance of the stage. They waited until it was close at hand, and then Jesse and Cole rode out into the very path of the travelers.

Instinctively the driver pulled up to avoid a collision.

"Halt!" was Jesse's order.

"What do you mean?" asked the Jehu.

"Up with your hands!" and Jesse's revolver enforced the command.

The driver was a coward, and he obeyed with alacrity.

In the meanwhile Frank and the other men had gathered around the stage. They wondered at the stillness there, but when they looked within the wonder ceased. There was but one passenger, and he seemed to be fast asleep.

"It's Carl!" whispered Jack Keene.

"Seize him by the foot and pull him out!" directed Frank.

Both bandits took hold, and the detective was yanked out in this unceremonious way. Aroused, he found himself struggling on the ground. Knowing his valor, the bandits saw fit to make a sure thing of it while he was unable to help himself with his usual vigor. This plan, carried out, soon placed him in their power fully, with ropes on his arms.

Jesse James rode forward, laughing.

"Carl, how are you?" he cried.

The detective's face was a panorama as he took in the facts of the case, but he soon recovered his usual coolness.

"Jesse James," he retorted, "I am better off than you will be in a short time."

"You have prophesied evil for me so long that you need not repeat it. Boys, have you looked for plunder?"

The bandit king winked to Cole, thus reminding him of the key, and the hint was taken. Cole plunged his hand into Carl's pocket, and though the detective grew startled and tried to resist—he was thinking of the key, too—he was soon relieved of all his valuables. Cole waved the roll of greenbacks thus obtained, and put stress on them in due words of exultation, but all the while he held more tightly to the all-important key, which was easily recognized. Jesse, Frank and Cole consulted.

"Shall we now go to the bank?" inquired the leader.

"I say yes."

"And I."

"Back to the town."

The driver was bound and put in the stage; the vehicle was hauled into the adjacent lot in a retired spot; one of the horses was appropriated for Carl, he being bound on; and the second animal tied to the wheel of the stage, and then they were ready.

They rode to the outskirts of the town.

Carl was full of fury, but he was helpless.

The citizens were much more quiet than was to be expected. The bandits correctly decided that this was because they thought the raiders had done their work and fled. Examination showed that nobody was near the bank.

The horses were left under the care of Oil Sheppard and Dick Little, and all the other men followed Jesse straight to the bank.

When Carl saw them halt by the door he trembled with excitement.

"The key!" cried Jesse.

Frank fitted it to the door.

"Give it a turn, Carl," added the bandit.

The detective groaned.

"Ha, ha, ha!" mocked the bandits.

"Devils! I will yet be square with you!" exclaimed Carl.

"That's right, Mr. Greene. Bank robbers need pluck, and we hail you as a worthy member of our band. Come in, Sir Robber!"

The key had been turned and the door opened. Jesse pushed the detective aside, and this remarkable burglary was under way. To say that Carl was furious would be putting it mildly; it was bad enough to see the James Boys doing their work all over the State and evading capture, but to be made a party to their crime was rough indeed. It broke Carl all up.

"Draw down the shades," directed Jesse.

It was done.

"Now for the treasure; let us see what our chances are of get-

ting it. Here we are cumbered with that detective. Throw him into yonder corner, and do you all get to work."

Carl was pitched into the place named without ceremony, and the robbers gave sharp heed to the safe. Luckily for them Cole and his companions had made arrangements before they met Jesse and Frank, and they had something to labor with.

Skillfully they began the task.

"This is no difficult job," said Jesse, presently.

"We are all right if they let us alone."

"I don't think they will come."

"Work on! Work on!"

Implements were hurriedly used, and at the end of twenty minutes Jack Keene triumphantly exclaimed:

"It weakens; we are almost in."

"Quick! Get at the treasure!"

CHAPTER XX.

"THE END OF THE FIGHT."

Jack Keene caught up a piece of iron which lay near and inserted it in the crevice opened by the side of the safe door.

"Catch hold!" he exclaimed. "Now heave!"

Several of the bandits put their strength to the bar, and with a motion in concert they tore the door open.

"Hurrah!" cried Jack. "We have the greenbacks!"

"Look! Look!" called Clell Miller. "Who is that at the door?"

The other bandits turned in time to see a dusky figure at the point named. The unknown waved his hand and shouted:

"I am here by the door, but I won't stay long. You shall see me again."

"What?" gasped Frank. "Carl Greene!"

"He has got away."

"Quick! Seize him!"

"Ha, ha, ha! You are too late! Ha, ha!"

With this mocking laugh Carl shot out of the door to the street, leaving the bandits stupefied with dismay. For a moment they said and did nothing and then Jesse James roused to life.

"Pursue!" he thundered. "It is ruin for us if he escapes!"

To the door rushed the men, but when they reached that point they saw Carl running down the street so far distant that they had no hope in a race with him.

"Useless!" exclaimed Jesse.

"What is to be done?"

"Carl will soon have the whole village on top of us."

"If we stay here we shall be captured or killed."

"We can't fight the whole town."

Jesse interrupted these comments sharply.

"Boys," he cried, "this is a time for action, not for words. We do not want to give up what is already in our grasp, and we will not if it is possible to keep it. Dive into the safe and pull out the treasure on the jump! To work!"

As promptly as possible the order was obeyed. Ed McMillan found leisure to go and see how the detective had divested himself of his bonds. There was not a cut on them, and he could only decide that the wily officer had fooled them as to the size of his wrists when the ropes were put on.

The bandits did not find the desired money in such quantities as they expected, and there was general discontent on each face near the safe.

Bob Younger and Bill Chadwell had remained by the door, and soon Bob's voice broke in on them.

"The enemy are coming!"

Jesse rushed to the door.

"Where?"

"Yonder."

"Carl has got his aid," bitterly admitted the bandit king. "Boys, if there is more in the safe, we must give it up. Take what you have and get away, or this triumph will be turned into the worst of defeats, or worse than that. Away, men; away!"

With his own hands the speaker pushed his most zealous man away from the safe, and then gave his efforts to further urge them toward the door, for the thirst of gold was on them, and they were inclined to be blind to all else.

As they emerged from the building, however, they did not need more urging. They saw the enemy racing toward the place, and so near, and in such numbers that they were startled.

"To the horses!" cried Jesse.

"To the horses!" was the jubilant cry.

"Where is the place?"

"Yonder by the tall tree."

"On, men; on!"

They did go on, and broke into the grove with a rush.

"Every man to the saddle!" Jesse stopped short.

"Destruction!" cried Jim Cummins, "the horses are gone!"

"This is where we left them."

"They have been spirited away."

"We are lost!"

"Never!" shouted Jesse. "We are not to be conquered by any adverse circumstances! Shall we yield to Carl Greene? Never!"

"Here they come!"

"Forward!" was the order, in Carl's clear tones. "We have them now!"

Jesse looked about like a cornered animal.

"What shall we do?" asked Hobbs Kerry.

"Do!" snapped Jesse. "Go and hang yourself, for one thing!"

"We must run, Jesse!" urged Frank.

"Hold your tongue!"

The bandit king was not in the mood to hear useless speech. He was doing some thinking, and it was more to the point than any talk could be.

He saw that the grove was calculated to hide them well for the brief space they desired it, and that beyond the grove there was a row of low bushes which led to the edge of the town.

"Follow me!" he suddenly directed.

Swiftly he ran toward the further side of the grove.

The second force of opponents had been too much demoralized to pursue, but as Carl arrived they took new courage, and all broke into the grove in company.

"Where are the outlaws?" was the cry.

Yes; where were they?

Jesse had reached the end of the grove. He looked to the bushes, and his command was imperative.

"Stoop low and follow me. Stoop low, or I will shoot the offender!"

Still running, and now bent nearly double, he hastened along the fringe of bushes.

"You are going toward the town!" remonstrated Wood Hite.

"Be still, fool, and follow!" snarled the angry leader.

Bold was his plan, and when the bandits caught the spirit of it they grew encouraged.

By means of this trick they had doubled on their own track, and were going just where nobody would expect them to go.

A bold device; but bold devices often win.

Rapid progress soon took them to the street. They saw no men there, and the women did not recognize them in the darkness.

"Now, if we had any way to get out of town," said Frank, "we should be all right."

"The boys may show up with the horses," suggested Cole.

"Did we clean out the bank wholly?" inquired Jack Keene.

"No."

"Then let's do it."

"What! Go back there?"

"Yes."

"It would be madness."

"Just the scheme," cried Jesse. "We will do it, sure. To the bank, boys, and we will show Carl that we are not to be crushed."

"No, no!" remonstrated Frank.

"I say yes," declared Clell.

"So do I," came from Ed McMillan.

"This way, then," added Jesse.

Frank was outvoted, so he fell into spirit with the wild plan, and to the bank they went. In they rushed, and the securing of the plunder began. Jesse stood at the door, and a woman soon hastened to the place. She looked at the bandit.

"Are you one of the detectives?" she asked.

"I am, madam."

"That awful Jesse James just strikes terror to my heart."

"Did you ever see him?"

"No; what is he like?"

"Well, madam, he is about my size, and wears his beard like mine; but his expression is wild and ferocious; mine is mild."

"Ain't you afraid of him?"

"He never got the better of me in a fight."

"I hope they will capture and hang him right off."

"Ha, ha, ha! Very good! Before he is swung off I will let him know of your kind wishes."

Jesse did not mind this uncomplimentary talk, and he was accomplishing his object, which was to keep her out of the bank until the bandits could secure the money. He did not reckon on one thing, however—not being able to see the rear of the building, he did not know that a man was running toward the place until a person dashed around the corner. He was beside Jesse and the woman in a moment. Breathlessly he asked:

"Have you seen— What! Great thunder! It is Jesse James!"

The bandit flung up his hands with a revolver in each.

"Yes," he cried; "I am Jesse James!"

"Oh!"

This exclamation was from the woman, and she then turned and fled precipitately.

Patter, patter, patter!

It was the sound of feet, and several men ran into view.

"Jesse James is here!" cried he who had come first. "This way! seize the outlaw!"

"Jesse James!"

To the front came Carl Greene.

"Close in!" he called. "Let us make sure this time!"

Clatter, clatter, clatter!

The bandit king looked up the street, and then grew jubilant. Dark the situation had seemed a moment before, but he saw his absent men riding toward the spot in haste, the horses all in their tow. The bandits had rushed out of the bank in haste and not a little alarmed by the new complication, but at sight of the horses they burst into ringing cheers.

"Hurrah for the James Boys! Hurrah! Hurrah!"

"Mount and away!" shouted Jesse.

"Fire, men!" thundered Carl.

The detective was game to the core, but his force was divided, and he had but few more than the bandits numbered. He was desperate, and the fact was clear in his tone. Several shots were fired by his men, but the volley was returned promptly by the robbers, and the latter swung into the saddle.

"Don't let them escape!" shouted the detective.

"Clear the way!" retorted Jesse.

"Empty your revolvers on them."

"Boys, they need a lesson!" cried the bandit king. "Sweep them away. Charge!"

With wild shouts the band obeyed, and they shot at the opposing force like an avalanche. Before that charge the feeble force could not stand, and all took to their heels but Carl. Left alone, his fate seemed sealed, but he was not to be conquered thus. He stood firm, and with a revolver in each hand, made a gallant stand.

"I defy you all!" he declared. "Come on, and I will die here, despising you as much as ever!"

Bang! bang! bang!

His revolvers were busy, and the rain of lead was hot, but the robbers were still determined to press on when a new sound broke on their ears.

"Down with the James Boys!"

"See!" cried Frank; "heavy reinforcements for Carl!"

"It is death for us to stay here."

"We must go," admitted Jesse; "they are too many for us. Turn and ride for your lives! Away!"

Quickly wheeled the bandits, and in a compact body they sped from the quarter of danger. The enemy were there in force, but not one was mounted, and the bandits knew they could afford to laugh at them. They sent back taunting cries as they dashed through the village unmolested by all.

"A cheer, men!" ordered Jesse.

"Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!" floated out the response.

"I defy them to get us now!" said Frank, jubilantly. "With our horses so fresh, and such a good start assured, we are positive victors."

"Hear Carl's angry commands to his followers."

"He is trying to get them in motion."

"He is too late. We have won the battle."

"The fight is fought to a finish," added Jesse, "and though we are scarred and disfigured in spots, the victory is surely ours."

It was no misjudged statement. They pressed on, and when morning dawned there was no sign of Carl Greene and his men. The bandits rode hard, and as luck and speed were with them, they gained a refuge where they were able to rest safe from all molestation.

THE END.

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